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MR. STEWART'S INTENTIONS.

VOL. I.

MR. STEWART'S INTENTIONS.

BY

FREDERICK WILLIAM ROBINSON,

AUTHOR OF

"GRANDMOTHER'S MONEY," "UNDER THE SPELL,"

"WILDFLOWER," "A WOMAN'S RANSOM,"

&c., &c.

"What is he, for Heaven's sake? Can no man give him his true character?"

HEYWOOD.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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BOOK I.

HOUSEKEEPER BERTIE.

CHAPTER I.

WAITING FOR MONEY.

WHY it did not come on the twenty-fifth of March as usual, was a great perplexity to me—greater to my brother John, for whom it was intended. Every Lady-Day, my mother had received the cheque in trust for John, until John came of age, took his arrears—and spent them. A great facility for spending his own money, and other people's, had John Kingsworth Casey—"like my poor husband," mother used to say, when grieving over my brother's improvidence.

When my dear mother died—John was two and twenty then, and I only sixteen—I had two things to wonder at: what would become of me?—what would Mrs. Kingsworth do about the money? The first was solved before my eyes were dry; the

committee considered my orphanage, and professed to understand my character—I who never understood it in all my life!—and set me in my mother's place, housekeeper and custodian to the Cork-cutters' Hall, Primrose Street, City. It was a place of responsibility, and weighed upon my youth—driving a great deal of youth's lightness away, and rendering me just a trifle old-fashioned before my time—though I fought hard against *that*, for old-fashioned people were my abomination then.

"You have been brought up carefully and religiously," said these kind City folk; "your mother was a good servant to us, and we must not forget her daughter. If you honestly believe that you can fulfil the duties of this place, why, keep it for your mother's sake, and by your industry, care, and perseverance, let us try to respect you for your own."

They said nothing about my youth; they knew nothing about my brother; through the usual mysterious channels of intelligence they had learned that I was staid and womanly for my years—as was natural enough, living in that gloomy City

building, with a grave mother, who shunned company; and so they trusted me, made me housekeeper, and piled upon my head the cares of office before my seventeenth birthday.

The second matter for wonderment at was solved at Lady-Day; Mrs Kingsworth had not replied to my deep, black-bordered letter, full of the worst news that it had ever been my lot to communicate, and I felt aggrieved at her silence and her want of sympathy with my loss. On the twenty-fifth of March, however, her letter came as usual, addressed to Miss Casey this time, and enclosing the usual cheque for one hundred pounds for John.

It was an odd, cold letter. I give it a place here, for more reasons than one:

"I am sorry, Miss Casey, to hear of the death of an old friend," it began. "You may believe it or not, according to your degree of faith in me. Finding you in your mother's place, and knowing a little of your character, I trust you as I trusted her in old times. I enclose the usual cheque for my godson—let it go the way of the other monies of which he has never known the use. I am true to my

word—he is true to his nature, and there's an end of my charity and his obligation. Acknowledge the receipt of this per return, and oblige

"Yours truly,

"CHARLOTTE KINGSWORTH."

I showed the letter to John, who turned it over and over in his hands after its perusal, whistled, read it once more, looked at it upside down, finally put it and the cheque very carelessly into the breast-pocket of his shabby shooting-jacket.

"You don't want this letter, Bertie?"

"N—no," was my hesitative answer.

"Then I'll keep it out of curiosity—out of respect to the old girl whose name I bear. What an odd fish she must be! What a compliment to *my* years of discretion to trust you with the money, girl!"

"You don't mind that, John?"

"Not a bit," was the reply; "she's sure of an answer from your methodical little self, and of the letter reaching my hands, which is a matter of greater importance, by a long chalk."

And with this "slangy" peroration, he took his departure.

I did not meet him again for twelve months—that was the longest time we had ever been apart; on the following twenty-sixth of March he came again, very worn in looks, but better dressed than I had seen him of late years. The cheque had arrived the day before, and was ready for him.

"Punctuality is the soul of business," he said lightly. "God bless Mother Kingsworth, and may her days in the land last as long as her money!"

"Hush, John!—I don't like that."

"I apologize—only my style of running on—anyhow. How's this dead-and-alive habitation agreeing with you, Bertie—badly?"

"No—why should you think that?"

"You're as white as a ghost, and you used to have a colour like a rose," he replied; "this is a kind of mausoleum to me—I am always glad to get out of it."

"Yes—I know that," was my quiet answer.

"Ahem—for the sake of the place, not of you, Bertie—you whom I ought to treat better—I con-

fess that. But by-and-by I shall astonish you a little."

"In what manner?"

"By my brotherly return for all that has passed —all your forbearance with me—all your kindness in cutting the reproaches short. That is something like a sister, to spare me a sermon on a brother's backsliding."

"I know by this time how little a sermon affects you, John."

"Well, sermons always gave me the horrors, and engendered a hate of the sermonizer."

"Always?"

"Ah! with one exception," he added quickly, even sorrowfully; "*her* sermons ever kept me straight, but they never turned me against her, —though she thought so."

"Scarcely."

"And I *was* thinking of trying to prove that all my moral qualities had not run utterly to seed, when—she died."

He talked a little of his future after that—of his new idea of settling down with all the wild oats sown, and then he went his way to sow them.

There was a rare harvest though, and he took an interest in his crops; he went on more wildly, became a worse man in all respects; even to the quiet precincts of the Corkcutters' Hall, there welled a rumour of the reckless spendthrift and drunkard that he had become. Then the day came round again—Lady-Day—and the money did not come with it, as I have already stated; so we begin our story-proper.

John made his appearance on the twenty-sixth of the month, as usual; he came in the night-time, as usual also. For years, I had not seen him in the daylight.

His appearance scared me, I remember. Sowing his wild oats, or reaping the harvest thereof, had been hard work, and reduced him to extremities. He was greatly changed, and my heart sank at the sight of him.

It had been raining all day, and he came in wet and muddy, leaving the imprint of his feet upon the crumb-cloth. He brought hat and great-coat into my sitting-room on the right of the entrance-hall, put his hat, battered and askew, on my fancy blotting-book, and began a struggle to free his

arms from the torn lining of his great-coat. Finally, he kissed me, and then sat down before me, with his coat across his knees, a tall, thin, haggard, fair-haired man, shabbily-dressed, and altogether deplorable.

"Oh! John, I am sorry to see this," I ejaculated.

He laughed; he took the troubles of life with composure, and treated misfortune as a jest. He had always done so, and was not likely to change in his latter days.

"You have nothing to be sorry for, Bertie. I'm well, strong, and in good circumstances."

"Appearances are against you, then, John."

"Never study appearances—'appearances are deceptive,' says the aphorist. Have a soul above them, like your brother."

"What are you doing now?"

"N—nothing particular. Taking to anything that turns up in the natural course of events," he answered; "oh! I have been doing very well this year. If I had not, I should have come begging here for a few pounds on account—you know my way."

"That has never been 'your way,' John."

"Simply for the reason that I have not required money," he replied; "that I'm clever enough to get my own living."

"Are you at the insurance office now?"

"How precious curious you are!" he said, with another laugh; "no, I am not. I have been airing my musical abilities, and playing in first-rate style at a music-hall. The leader and I quarrelled about something—I forget what—and I went to the Chelsea Gardens."

"To play there?"

"No—I'd sold my violin—a friend took a fancy to it, and gave me double its value for it—that's generally the way with friends, you'll find. I was check-taker at the Chelsea Gardens. Got on first-rate there until the manager and I quarrelled about something—I forget what."

"Quarelled again!"

"Some mistake, I believe—he suspected my honesty, and I knocked him down. Only a little difference, you see; and yet he would not look over it, when he was sober—or when I was sober, I forget which. So I went to the Royal."

"Royal?"

"Theatre Royal—as box-keeper. Didn't stop there three weeks. Impossible to agree with old Gilford—he was always smelling spirits, he said—so I gave up the whole affair for billiards, which has paid pretty well, Bertie—pretty well, considering."

"Only to see you settle down, John, to something quiet and respectable!"

"Ah! that's it—that's the difficulty. I'm looking out for something every day now, that I can go at with a will. I'm rather tired of hanging about town. You are getting on well, I suppose?"

"Yes, pretty well."

"Dull as usual in this abominable den?"

"I don't find it dull—I am used to it."

"You were ever such a merry, light-hearted child, Bertie; it *is* odd that fate should have changed you to a staid, methodical woman at eighteen years of age. You have friends about here?"

"Not any."

"Keep no company?"

"No."

"Penal servitude, I call it. I suppose the Corkcutters hold their committees here?"

"Once a month."

"And their dinners?"

"Twice a year."

"What a jolly place!—any clerks?"

"An old gentleman here from ten till four. Two, sometimes three clerks, for a week or two after the midsummer quarter, when rents are paid in."

"A favourite quarter-day with the Corkcutters' Corporation—well, Lady-Day for me!"

He filled two glasses with sherry from the decanter I had set out for him in anticipation of his arrival, and placed one glass at my elbow. He always took wine with me on Lady-Day, and it was quite a solemn event to bow and smile over our Amontillado.

"God bless you, Bertie!" he always said on that occasion; and I think he meant it, though he darted away from the sentiment at a tangent, and dashed into topics foreign to all evidence of feeling.

"I don't know," he said, on this present occasion, "if I haven't as great a right to pity you as

you have to pity me. You look with regret at what mother used to call my idle and profitless life—I call such a life as yours slavery and isolation. You will grow old before your time—you will be a little withered old woman, with nothing to love but a favourite cat, at thirty years of age—yours will be a stagnant existence, devoid of incident, interest, and colour."

What a prophecy! I laughed then at his picture, and said that I was content with it. I did not care for change; the peace and rest of the old City office had stolen to my heart, perhaps, for the reason that no temptation had passed athwart it to disturb me. On the verge of a great change—the shadow of it had not been cast upon my path to warn me of an end to "quietness."

"So Lady-Day for me," he said, once more, by way of hint this time that he was there on business.

"Mrs. Kingsworth appears to have missed a post, John," I said to my brother, "for her cheque has not arrived yet, I am sorry to say."

"The deuce it hasn't!" he responded; "that's odd!"

For an instant he looked disappointed, thrust his hands to the depths of his pockets, and surveyed ruefully the muddy tips of his boots. Then he found his way to his meaningless laugh, somehow.

"Mrs. Kingsworth caught tripping in punctuality—the business woman—the woman with the memory that never betrayed her, Bertie! This is a good joke."

"It is rather remarkable, John. It *will* come, I suppose, this money?"

My brother's laugh came to an abrupt termination, and he stared hard at me.

"Why, you don't doubt that, surely? Phew!" he exclaimed, "that would be a clincher!"

He again examined the tips of his boots, with an aspect more rueful than he had hitherto adopted.

"That's an ugly thought, Bertie," he said. "You haven't—heard anything, I suppose, from the old quarter?"

"Not a word."

"Oh! then, begone dull care—I have faith in Mrs. Kingsworth's *affection!* Why, my own godmother is not going to turn against me at the eleventh hour?"

"I have often thought that she would tire of her liberality."

"She's a rich woman!"

"The hundred pounds were given in the first instance for your education—continued afterwards as a means of assisting your progress in life—your *progress!*"

"Yes, but—oh! I'll not think of it," he exclaimed, "sufficient for the day is the evil thereof—that's a Bible text, and Kingsworth Casey's. She would never throw a fellow off without due warning, and become suddenly harsh and uncharitable. Here's Mrs. Kingsworth's health."

He drank more sherry after his disappointment; very rapidly the wine diminished in the decanter—there was excitement, even restlessness, in his demeanour after that. He had taken things easily through life—been ever careless and improvident—but there was an affectation of easiness that night, and he could not disguise it.

"Have you any bills to meet?—is there anything you have promised to pay, John?" I asked.

"Why?" he rejoined, looking under his thick eyebrows at me.

"I have saved a little money lately—can advance a little, if you wish it."

He seemed to reflect upon the matter, then said suddenly, almost sharply—"I don't wish it."

"If——"

"I've plenty of money," he said hurriedly; "I'm not hard up—I can have a place to-morrow, if I like. It's all right enough—upon my soul, I'm not hard up, Bertie."

He started to his feet and began to fight his way into his great-coat again; in a few seconds he was buttoned to the chin, and in his haste and impoliteness had already pressed his shabby hat over his eyes. He seemed anxious to be gone, as though that were the better method to resist the temptation that had suddenly beset him.

"Going?"

"Yes—I have an appointment, Bertie—I expect to meet a friend to-night."

"I will not ask you to stay, then," I said; "and —and about the cheque—if it comes——"

"*When* it comes," he corrected.

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"When it comes, shall I forward it? What is your address?"

He inscribed a black cross with his boot on the white crumb-cloth, then said,

"I'll come in three days. We'll give the old girl three days. After that, I'll write—or you'll write to her—and ask if she's well, poor old soul. Good night, Bertie. Don't come out in the cold, girl."

Of course I took no heed of this request, and rose to accompany him along the broad stone corridor, to the great hall, ever so full of echoes.

Under the lamp he stooped and kissed me, with that evidence of affection which flickered forth once a year at least—which had never wholly died away—which was even on that night more demonstrative, without being less real.

"Good night, Bertie—now steer clear of the door. It's a wretched night!"

He essayed to open the door but there were two locks, a chain, two bolts, and a bar, and people unused to them soon grew confused in their efforts to escape.

"That fool of a servant has locked up for the

night," he said, as I took his place, and finally opened the door for him.

Some one who had been leaning against the door came with a backward step or two into the hall, and staggered to preserve a balance.

"Why, who's this?"

It was a tall girl, very poorly clad, with a black straw bonnet awry, and a black and white check shawl trailing behind her, that found herself suddenly in the Corkcutters' Hall, and began rubbing her eyes with her knuckles to wake herself up, and more thoroughly arrive at a correct state of mundane affairs.

"I—I beg pardon," she said, "I don't want anything. Oh! there you are, Mr. Jack?"

"There, that'll do," said my brother, "come away. What the devil do you mean by dodging a fellow like this?"

"Couldn't make out, Jack, where you were a-going to—you don't mind—you won't be hard?"

"No—come on. This—this nondescript, Bertie, is a kind of maid-of-all-work to my select establishment. Touched in the head, poor devil," he added; "just touched enough to make herself a nuisance.

I'll tell you all about her another time. Come on —do."

"Who—is this?" asked the girl, advancing to me, and looking me so steadily and earnestly in the face, that I shrank back a little.

"My sister—a real lady, so make your best curtsey, Em, for it's the first one you have ever seen."

The girl—she was not more than fourteen years of age—stared harder than ever at me, then, without attending to my brother's commands, seized his arm, and walked towards the steps.

"Then she's your sister—is she?—that's the girl you've bragged so much about?"

My brother laughed, and went down the steps with her in the wind and rain still rioting without there.

"I shall be here next Thursday, Bertie," he said; "good night."

In my amazement I did not respond to his adieux; I stood with the door half open, looking after him and his companion. I saw the latter look into his face with a wild, almost a hungry look, and heard her say,

"The money—have you got it?"

"Hush!—no."

"What's to become of *us*, then?"

Then they went along the narrow roadway, hemmed in by the tall houses, offices and warehouses; and left me something more to wonder at, besides Mrs. Kingsworth's silence.

CHAPTER II.

"EM."

I TRIED to wait patiently till the end of the three days; the solution to the riddle of John Kingsworth's strange companion could not arrive before that period, and it was useless to grow excited over the mystery, if mystery it were. I consoled myself with that assurance, and was all the more excited despite my consolation. I caught myself dreaming of my brother, and the large-eyed, haggard girl who had been waiting for him in the doorway of the Corkcutters' Hall. I almost forgot the absent money, and Mrs. Kingsworth's silence, until the third day came round, and the bad news of "no news" was left me to communicate.

Then I was troubled by the result; I knew how much the non-delivery of a hundred-pound cheque

would affect my brother—how it had become a thing of course with him, that money—which he forestalled beforehand, doubtless, and had long considered his just due. More than once it had suggested itself to me, that that hundred pounds per annum had been, after all, my brother's ruin—that he had seen himself provided for to some extent, and so relaxed the little energy which he possessed once—only a little energy, even in his best days! It had sapped his efforts to make his own way; it had rendered him idle, when idleness was the slow murder of his manhood; it had thrown in his way careless and designing men; it had rendered him independent of his home, regardless of home ties, indifferent to his future; it had led him on the wrong road from which he had thought of deviating once or twice, but never made one honest, earnest effort to escape from.

I was pitied for the *onus* of such relationship; to most men he was nothing more than an idle scamp, devoid of all right principle; the little good there was in him no one saw but me. And I could see the good dying away, alas! and had no power to effect a change.

On the Thursday evening I arranged the room for his arrival; set another decanter of sherry on the table; made a good fire in the capacious grate, drew the red curtains before the window-shutters, and waited for my brother's coming. It was striking nine by the great clock in the hall when the bell rang, and I gave my final stir to the fire. The night was cold and wet again, and he would come in damp and chilly from the streets.

The servant entered, but ushered not my brother into the room.

"If you please, Miss Casey, here's a young gal wants to see you for a moment."

"What kind of girl?"

"A poor girl—with a letter."

"Show her in, Mary."

The servant retired—reappeared, followed by the strange weird-looking girl who had gone away with my brother three nights since. She curtsied this time as she entered, and then stood abashed by the door, turning the letter she had brought with her over and over in her hands.

The servant withdrew, and left us together.

"Take a seat, please. Have you walked hither?"

"To be sure I have."

"Will you sit down?"

"If you don't mind, Miss Casey."

Her demeanour had considerably improved; she was evidently on her guard, and was somewhat stiff and unnatural in consequence. She had learned her lesson—possibly her first lesson—in proprieties, and was quiet, decorous, and respectful. But what a wild-looking girl it was still, despite the bonnet being carefully fitted on her head, the dark hair smooth and glossy, and the face unmasked by twenty-four hours dirt. "Touched in the head" my brother had affirmed in my last interview with him—was that true or not?

"How is it that Mr. Casey has not come to-night?"

"He's—you'll see in the letter," she corrected.

"Will you sit down?" I inquired again.

She gave me the letter, and then retired to a chair in the extreme corner of the room, as far away from my observation as possible. My critical glances had disturbed her equanimity. I opened the letter, and read the following hastily-written lines:—

"DEAR BERTIE,

"Business of an important nature keeps me from fulfilling my promise this evening. Kindly send the cheque by bearer, a girl whom you may trust implicitly. Draw her out if you can, and let me know what you think of her when we meet again.

"Your affectionate brother,

"JOHN KINGSWORTH CASEY."

An epistle that explained little, and showed his old carelessness in a new light. Confident of the money having come to hand, and thinking nothing of entrusting so large an amount to this ignorant, demented girl.

"Mr. Casey tells me that he is busy," I remarked, folding up the letter.

"Yes—very busy," was the quick answer.

"Is he at home to-night?"

"No—yes."

"Yes, you mean, I presume?"

"I said 'yes,'" was the half-aggrieved answer.

"I will write a letter to my brother if you'll wait," I said, drawing my desk towards me. She

nodded her head, and sat patient and observant, taking stock of everything in the room, on the mantel-piece, on the table at which I sat—taking stock of me in particular.

I found the letter hard to write with that strange figure watching the operation; it was a difficult letter, for I had to dash my brother's hopes down by stating that no cheque had been received, and that there was no news to communicate. I reiterated my willingness to lend him any money of which he might be in need, and concluded by expressing a hope that I should see him to-morrow, or the next day, when we might arrange together a letter for the patroness who had forgotten us so strangely.

When the letter was written and sealed, I looked at the girl again, and she immediately became interested in the ceiling.

"You'll take care of this letter?"

"Yes—miss," she added, after a pause.

"Have you far to go?"

"Not very; only across—the water."

This seemed "drawing her out" on my own account, rather than on my brother's, and I

blushed at the idea. The difficulty was to "draw her out" at all, and the way was not very clearly defined.

"Have you been long with my brother?" I ventured to inquire.

"Oh! a very long time."

"As servant?"

"As—as anything that can be of use to him, and show him how I love him," she ejaculated.

"Love him!—what do you mean?"

"I ain't got any one else to love—if it hadn't been for him I should have been put in the workus when father died. He was good to father too, and promised father to see after me—he always took my part, and I take his—always. There's not such another man in all the world as your brother."

"So clever?"

"I don't know if he's clever—what's the good of being clever? But he's so happy—and as for trouble, lawks! Miss Casey, he don't care a brass farthing for trouble! He says he likes it, and shouldn't be happy without it."

"Do you think that he is in trouble now?"

"Not more than he gen'rally is—not so much

praps. He's in want of money, of course—and as the money hasn't come, he's a bit screwed like—that's all. And I shan't take any good news back—oh! lor!"

"How do you know that?"

"You haven't put no cheque in there—I've been a-watching."

"Oh!—have you?"

"And after Lady-Day the cheque comes, and he buys me a new dress out of it, and takes me to the theatre, and all that. Then he goes it, Jack does, and I sit up for him, and he comes in later and later, until all the money's gone, and then he's happy. Never afore, that I remember. Let me see, now?"

She sat and thought for awhile, then meeting my glance, became suddenly on her guard.

"Shall I take the letter?"

"If you please—if you have nothing more to say to me."

"Nothing more—I don't know that I aint said too much already."

She rose and took the letter from the table, keeping her gaze so intently fixed on the decanter,

that I took it as a hint to offer her a portion of that refreshment so temptingly displayed before her.

"Will you take a glass of wine before you go?" I asked.

"Oh! no—it gets in my head. I never take wine now!" said she. "If you don't mind, I'll try a biscuit."

A long bony hand was extended from her shawl, and several biscuits were immediately confiscated and dropped furtively into the pocket of her dress. I thought that I had detected a motive for the act, and shuddered a little.

"You—you are not in want at home?" I asked, quickly.

"Oh! no," was the prompt reply; "he never wants for nothing—he's not the man, and he's such lots of friends, you see. And they come in at all times—especially about this time of year—the sneaks! I only wish that Jack would make a clean house of some of 'em."

"Not true friends, then?"

"Not all of 'em," she cried, passionately; "they're hard to get at—even in a fine house like this, I daresay."

"Yes, very hard."

"I suppose they come after that?"—pointing to the wine—"If you keep too much of it about, they're sure to come!"

I could not restrain a laugh at the irony of this girl, who spoke in good faith, and even without an acrid meaning; she had seen the ill-effects in my brother's mode of living, perhaps, and deduced her moral therefrom.

"How old are you?" I asked.

"Fourteen, Miss Casey," she added again, with that odd characteristic jerk that told of her afternoon's training in civility.

"Have you been to school?"

"Not had much time—tried it on once or twice, but could not bear the guv'nesses and *their* airs. I'm an awful temper, Miss," she said, her dark eyes lighting up, "and can't bear crossing. My mother bust a wessel and killed herself—Jack says it'll happen to me some day, if I don't keep my tempers down. As if I could, with people making game of me, and talking against *him* who has been so very kind and good to me! Oh! Miss Casey, you're proud of your brother—ain't you?"

"I was—once."

"You ain't turned against him—have you?"

"No, that is not likely."

"Why *once*, then?"

"When he was a boy, he was very clever for his age, and I used to fancy that he would become a great man, and be talked about."

"They talk about him awful—I've just said so."

"Talked about in a different sense—with respect, girl. Don't you understand me?"

"Ye—es, I think so."

"And his cleverness did not get him on in life, as I wished and hoped."

"Has yourn?"

"I never was clever."

"He says you are, and he meant it when he said so too. You'd be surprised how much he's got to say of you sometimes."

"I am glad that he does not forget me. You and he are always together, then?"

"Not always. I've a room of my own—and I—I know my place."

"That's well."

"I think I'll go now—thankee for not being

hard with me. He said you wouldn't be, but I didn't believe him. Good night—miss."

She dropped her best curtsey again, and then left me, more perplexed concerning her than ever.

The next morning I rose early, fraught with the instinct that Mrs. Kingsworth's letter would arrive; the first post brought in country letters, and I took my early breakfast closer to the window, in order that I might see the postman come up the broad steps of the Corkcutters' Hall. And he came, dropped the letters into the box, delivered his welcome double rap, and departed. My maid brought me in the letters, but they were all official missives, and appertained to the old clerk's business—not mine. After that fallacious hope, I gave up. Friday was an unlucky day, and the chance would never come again for Kingsworth—we should hear no more from the eccentric patroness of our family.

I waited for my brother in the evening, but he came not. Saturday the postman passed the Hall, but I was not sanguine that day—I had given up Mrs. Kingsworth then. In the evening I made sure of seeing John again, and again the hours

stole on into the night, and balked me of his presence. Then I grew perplexed about him; my only brother, the only relation I possessed in the world—the man who, with all his faults, his shortcomings, his reckless disregard of common prudence, I loved with all my heart. His want of forethought, his very weakness, drew that heart towards him; always to me he seemed my junior, rather than my senior by six years.

Sunday morning I went to church, and fought hard to keep him from my thoughts for awhile, but he would intrude, in spite of me: what would he do now?—what *was* he doing?—*where* could he be? Sunday evening, going down the steps to church again, he came face to face with me at last.

"Bertie!—is that you?" he said.

"Yes," I answered; "where have you been the last two days, John?"

"Busy, child, busy," he replied. "Am I keeping you from church?"

"Will you accompany me?"

"No, thank you," was the dry response; "I am not respectable enough, just at present. Shall I wait till you return?"

"No—I will go back with you. I am excited and troubled about you."

We went back; I opened the door with my pass-key, and he followed me into the sitting-room, where I turned up the gas, and stirred the fire for him. Then I looked at him steadfastly, and he laughed at me for my intent inspection.

"What do you expect to see in me, Bertie?"

"I don't know—a change, perhaps."

"A change for the better, because Mrs. Kingsworth tightens her purse-strings—odd, that would be."

There *was* a change in him for all that. He was more haggard, even more disreputable. Had he given way more—become more reckless with the heavy disappointment which had suddenly encountered him? It seemed so.

"There is no letter, then?" he said.

"No."

"I give her up now," he added, with a forced lightness that set ill upon him. "Thanks for all past favours, Mrs. K., and so farewell. The old woman was right enough to say, 'No further with my money—it has not benefited you, and so an

end to misplaced charity.' The only remarkable thing about it is, that she should have borne with me so long."

"What will you do now?"

"Rattle along at something or other. I'm not afraid—I don't look afraid, I hope?"

"N—no."

"I shall drop into a clerk's place again, I think —I don't know."

"And at present—are you short of money?"

"No," was the sharp answer; "not short—exactly."

"I think you are—I know you are!" was my half-angry exclamation. "Why do you hold aloof from one who *can* help you, and has a right to help you, John?"

"Help me with how much?" he asked, thoughtfully.

"How much will relieve you from your present embarrassments?"

"Fifty pounds."

"It will not ruin me to lend you that sum, John."

John Kingsworth Casey unfastened the two top

buttons of his great-coat, and surveyed me dreamily. His hands, hitherto enfolded together with a nervous clutch, relaxed, and were passed through his unkempt hair; he breathed hard, and glared at me till my heart beat more rapidly with the strange incomprehensibility of his looks.

"How much money have you got in the house?" he said, with a hoarse whisper, at last.

"Twenty pounds—you can have the thirty any day after to-morrow."

"Give me the twenty—I'll take that—no more," he said, fiercely. "May I drop down dead here if I'll take more than that!—if I'd take that—only—only—where's the drink, Bertie? I can't stand this!"

I produced the decanter of sherry at his request, placed a glass at his side, and then hastened up-stairs into my own bed-room, where my little cash-box was kept that held my savings. I felt that I was not acting wisely, but I would not reflect upon the matter. He needed help in that hour—I was sure of it, and I alone could help him, and keep the wolf away from the door for awhile.

Down-stairs again, I stopped and held my

breath with surprise—the hall-door was open, and John was going down the steps, when I darted forward and seized his arm.

"Where are you going?"

"Away from you—don't hold a rascal's arm, but let him go. It will be better for you and him in this world—perhaps the next."

"Come back—you must not go away like this. It is unkind and cruel of you."

"I don't want any money—I've suddenly thought of something, Bertie."

"Come back, then."

"Very well—if you wish it. Just for a minute."

We closed the door and went down-stairs together. He did not sit down again, but commenced that rapid perambulation up and down the room, always so irritating to a female mind. His wild demeanour had vanished, however, and he was his free, easy self again.

"Look here, Bertie—it's all right—I don't want money. I know a fellow who—who owes me a lot, and will pay me to-morrow—and I can get a first-rate situation on Wednesday, if I like."

"But I have a right to help you."

"You"—with a laugh—"will have to help yourself presently. Remember that prophecy in the days ahead of you, and then thank your lucky stars that a vagabond brother was too proud to touch your money. Too proud, by all that's holy on earth, and that's not much to swear by—hanged if it be!"

He looked at me, anticipating a laugh at this morbid pleasantry, but my face was grave enough, and made his grave.

"Well, the truth is, I'll keep my word for once in my life. I swore—on the Bible—" he added with a shudder, "that you alone of all the world should not be preyed upon, or sponged upon, by me. I swore it to mother on the night she died—when you were downstairs for a moment. She died all the happier for it, I think; and you—you must help me to keep my word, just for once in my life to keep my word, Bertie—will you?"

He entreated me like a child—weak to resist temptation—and I pressed him no further.

"Yes, I will help you to keep your word, John."

"So, if you have brought the money downstairs, hide it from my sight, please. I shall be

all the better and more rational for its absence. By Heaven! I am a hero to-night!" he exclaimed, tilting the sherry with a dash into his glass, and on to my best cloth table-cover—oh! dear! "and here's success in life to the heroics."

"John, dear, what led you wrong in life?" I asked, leaning my hands upon his arm; "what took you first away from the good, generous thoughts that have not, even yet, wholly deserted you?"

"Oh! yes, they have. You don't know what a scamp I am," he said curtly; "pure inclination for evil led me wrong—still keeps me going down to Pandemonium, steadily and easily. Temptation never beset me—I went quietly forth to meet it—I found it and—*sank!* Shall I pour you out a glass of sherry, Bertie?"

"No!—no! This is horrid!"

"Not horrid," he said, intentionally mistaking my meaning; "only a little flat, through being decantered last Thursday. Tidy sherry in its way, though—Em told me about it, and *how nice* it looked. And, by-the-way, that reminds me of a favour you can do me, Bertie."

"What is it?"

"Take that girl away from me, as you would take her away from the devil, into whose clutches she has fallen."

"Take her away!—what can I do?"

"She's an ignorant, wilful girl—foolish enough, you may guess, to look upon *me* as her friend—a bad temper, intractable and fierce, but with a big heart, to be worked upon by a clever woman like yourself. I am tired of her—I can't afford to keep a servant any longer—she's growing too old, and should advance in life, and find a better place than mine. Besides—you, a woman of the world, know how people talk, and spare no one in their criticisms. Will you help her, or shall I send her to the workhouse?"

"I will help her, if it lies in my power; but I must think of the best method."

"I am afraid that there is but little time for thinking—I am heartily tired of the girl, and her wearisome ways, and—would foist her upon you like a generous man as I am. I——"

He paused, for there came a tap at the panels

of the door, followed by the hasty appearance of my maid.

"Oh! if you please, miss, here's a female won't go away in the hall—won't state her business, or anything."

"I have heard no bell ring—no summons at the door."

"Oh! if you please, miss, I was at the door, just for a moment at the door, to see if the stars were a-shining or not, when she flounced in."

"Em!" ejaculated my brother; "confound that girl!—she's an unbearable nuisance, after all!"

The door opened, and the intruder, *sans cérémonie*, entered my apartments.

Not "Em," but a tall, thin, sallow-faced woman, with a walking-stick—a woman whom neither I nor John had seen before.

"You are Bertha Casey, I presume—I am Charlotte Kingsworth," she said; "now let me sit down and rest awhile."

CHAPTER III.

A WOMAN OF THE WORLD.

MRS. KINGSWORTH, our eccentric patroness, a woman who had held aloof from us through life, and yet been more than generous to our family, very slowly and steadily relapsed into a seat by the table, crossed her hands upon her gold-headed walking-stick, and proceeded to compose herself after her long journey.

She took a long time to compose herself, or to deliberate upon her best method of procedure; when I opened my lips to speak she detected the movement, and said somewhat sharply,

"Don't speak to me, please, just yet. When I am inclined for conversation, I will trouble you!"

So we relapsed into position stolidly and silently; I took the seat my brother had vacated, and my

brother, discomfited and almost sheepish, stood with his elbow on the mantel-piece, looking down at the fire-light. I had leisure to observe Mrs. Kingsworth, and being of a curious turn of mind, and having recovered that degree of nerve which had been seriously distracted by so sudden a raid upon my office quarters, I took the liberty of surveying my family patroness.

A very tall thin lady, looking more thin and angular for the absence of all under-skirts to her dress; clad in a black silk that had seen long service before its advent in the Corkcutters' Hall, and with her head adorned by a plain straw bonnet crossed with a black silk ribbon. Her gloves were faultless at least, and fitted tightly the thin hands of their owner—but her boots were double-soled sensible boots, admirably adapted for pedestrian exercise, or kicking an obtrusive enemy out of her path. And her face, at which I glanced more than once, and which attracted me despite myself—what a sallow, sharp-featured, keen face it was!—lit up by glittering grey eyes, that gave me the unpleasant sensation of being looked "through and through." It struck me long before

the silence was broken that Mrs. Kingsworth did not require time so much for self-composure, as for taking stock of my brother and me in *her* turn. She wished to become used to *our* faces before she began that explanation of her presence there; to judge us, possibly to steel herself against us. Hers was an uncomfortable face in its immobility; looking at the many lines thereon, the compression of the thin lips, the sharpness of her long straight nose, the air of sternness, even gravity, which I felt was natural to her face rather than put on for the occasion, suggested to me a woman who had suffered much in life, and who, in contending against suffering, had hardened in the process.

She nodded her head towards me at last, by way of permission conceded to disturb the silence that had reigned in our midst.

"You are Mrs. Kingsworth?"

"I have told you so," was the grave answer.

"I am pleased to see you, madam, for the first time—to be enabled personally to thank you for all past kindnesses to our family."

"You are grateful, then?" she asked quietly.

"Yes—very grateful."

"Gratitude is a rare virtue, which it is difficult to foster in a heart so young as yours."

"Why, madam? I do not understand."

"Youth is selfish, spasmodic, quick to receive an impression, quick to erase one. Besides, I am not aware that *you* are indebted to me for any act of kindness or consideration."

"No, madam; directly, perhaps, I have received no favour at your hands."

"Are you waiting for one?"

I felt my cheeks crimson at this, and replied somewhat hastily,

"No, Mrs. Kingsworth. Neither waiting nor wishing."

"You are a sharp woman," she said, steadfastly regarding me. "I have always understood that in you were all the virtues under heaven. A model heroine, to grow strong in time of trouble, and turn the left cheek to the smiter when struck upon the right."

"A character which I deserved not, Mrs. Kingsworth."

"I had it from your mother—a truthful woman in my time."

"Always, madam—always."

"And yet you endorse not her flattering opinion—well, mothers are blind to the foibles of their offspring, and see the common every-day virtues of their children through magnifying—or distorting—glasses. What did your weak-minded mother think of *him*?"

She pointed with her stick at my brother, who moved a little uneasily at finding himself the leading subject of discourse, and even ventured to glance furtively in her direction.

"You may look me full in the face, John Kingsworth—I am not ashamed of my appearance yet."

"I—no—indeed, madam!" stammered John, as though that last assertion were matter of the deepest astonishment to him.

"Coming hither to-night, I certainly did not anticipate the honour of an interview with my godson, but I am glad to have the opportunity offered me of making his acquaintance. He has been often in my thoughts—I have heard a great deal of him in my time—I have not been neglectful of his advancement in life—I have done my

best, so far as money was concerned, to make a gentleman and scholar of him."

"You have been more kind to me than I deserved, madam," said John, in a low tone.

"Humble, like your sister, I see—bowed down by the extent of my kindness, of course—ever my obliged and faithful servant, as those who wish me in my grave are in the habit of writing at times. Well, Kingsworth, you do my kindness credit."

"I wish I did!" he burst forth, in more natural tones.

"You realize my expectations, for they were not raised too high, by any means," she said, very coldly, I may almost add very cruelly. "I am a woman of the world, and I have gathered together much store of worldly wisdom. It has been a comfort to me in my old age, and kept me from giving way more than once. It has preserved me, thank heaven, from becoming weak and childish. Have you any objection to sit down?"

"N—no, madam. I was bidding my sister good night when you arrived."

"Sit down, then, if your engagements for this evening will allow you."

She motioned him to a seat with a haughty gesture of her hand, and then bent her looks towards him again. She forgot me in her greater interest in him who bore her name.

"I am going to sketch a little picture, as briefly as I can. Will you bear with my prolixity?"

John Kingsworth roughened his hair the wrong way, coughed, and writhed uneasily. He would try to bear it, was implied by his demeanour.

"Your mother came of a good family, and married into a bad one. That is the fate of many of us, and not to be wondered at in this instance. Your father was an adventurer—keep your seat, Miss Casey, and learn to hear the truth, whatever it may be—he married your mother for money, spent her money like *a gentleman*, worried her old before her time, and then died, much to his annoyance, I have heard. After his death your mother fought a hard battle, till she obtained this situation. The last time your mother and I met was at the christening of your estimable self, sir; and then came oblivion, until trouble woke her up to a sense of friendliness again."

"My mother—" I began.

"Patience, Miss Casey; I bore your mother no malice—she had many reasons for dropping my acquaintance; I should not have cared to continue hers. I was not surprised at her long silence, and I was not surprised in later days at a sudden letter from her. In all my life, after thoroughly understanding the strange nature of this world, the ways and doings of its worldlings have failed to surprise *me*. There is nothing on earth—or under it, I might say—which could surprise me now! I am prepared for any extravagance of conduct in anybody I love, hate, or am acquainted with. Therefore, my path of life is smooth and straight enough, and I meet with no perplexities, *en route*."

There was nothing to reply to this egotistical assertion, uttered in good faith, and yet scarcely to be believed. She was cold, cutting, and hard enough, and it was just possible to imagine her the statue she asserted herself to have become.

"Your mother was poor, and I was a widow, with few claims upon the wealth my husband had bequeathed me. I had no call for money—it was rusting at my banker's—I knew that it would be scattered broadcast by the harpies to whose share

it would eventually fall—I had no reason to study anybody in the world, and I sent her a hundred pounds to relieve her embarrassments, and told her that every Lady-Day a cheque for the same amount should be sent for *your* education," suddenly turning to my brother, "for your advancement in any station of life it might please you to pursue. I believe that I kept my word."

"Thank you—yes."

"I am not surprised that the money did you more harm than good—that you followed in your father's steps, and became reckless, improvident, and false—I had made no bargain with you, and you were free to march on to perdition if it suited your tastes."

She said it very bitterly, and John Kingsworth shrank at her words—cowered even away from them, and turned his face towards the fire again.

"You are here to-night more out of anxiety for the money which I did not send this year, than in concern for a sister left a lonely woman in this house. Is that true?"

"Yes—quite true," he murmured.

"Scarcely—" I began, when Mrs. Kingsworth interrupted me.

"You have a most unpleasant habit of intruding your opinions upon those who do not solicit them, Miss Casey. Surely your brother is old enough to speak for himself."

"She is a good woman, Mrs. Kingsworth, who would take the part of a vagabond brother—spare her your satire, if you please."

It was the first time—the very first time in all his life—that I had heard him speak boldly—speak up for me! I was glad that he had not sat there cowering from her cold invectives all the while, and that there was some evidence of "spirit" in him.

"Time enough to speak to her," responded Mrs. Kingsworth, "when my business is done with *you*, sir, and you have gone back to that world in which you are more at your ease. Shall I tell you why I did not send the money this year?"

"I'm all attention," murmured my brother, relapsing into his old manner, and becoming even more troubled by her presence there.

"I have found a new object more worthy of my

thoughts and—my money. My brother, who was supposed to have died in India long since, has returned to England. A remarkable leap into life again, but my nerves were steeled against remarkable events, and I shook hands with him as though we had met yesterday instead of two score years ago. There had never been much love between us, and his coming back, ugly and cadaverous, was not likely to revive it. His daughter came with him, and will inherit all my money—she is the object of that worthier interest to which I have alluded. If she had not come back, you would have inherited a portion of my fortune—so remember my niece in your prayers from this time forth."

"Ye—es, ma'am."

"From this time forth careful with my money for her sake—you understand?"

"Perfectly."

"You are prepared to put up with the loss of a hundred pounds per annum?"

"I shall not fret myself to death at its withdrawal," said my brother. "I shall miss the money for a time—presently I hope that I shall not feel its loss."

"What scheme of aggrandizement are you fostering now?"

"Oh! I have not thought of any particular scheme yet awhile, Mrs. Kingsworth. Luck will not desert me—it will come."

"Sanguine and easy—well, for your own sake, and by your own efforts, I hope it will. I wish no harm to you. Are you going now?"

"Yes—I think I will," he answered, rising from his chair.

"You have nothing more to say?"

"I—I don't know that I have. I—I haven't said much to the point at all."

"Women, who are naturally loquacious, monopolize the lion's share of conversation."

"I will say," he added, with a second spasm of new energy, "that you have been more kind to me than I ever deserved—and that I have *not* been grateful for it, or done my best with the money you were good enough to send me annually. In fact, Mrs. Kingsworth, I have been a scamp—trying once or twice to become less scampish, and failing miserably from want of knowledge, want of courage, even want of principle! Fairly a man

who deserves no helping—who does not care to help himself, and is—so they tell me, my way—his greatest enemy. Let me thank you for all past favours, and bid you, very respectfully, a good evening."

He looked towards me, and said in a different tone: "Good night, Bertie," then walked across the room towards the door.

"Stay—will you, sir?" she demanded very sharply.

My brother came to a full stop. Mrs. Kingsworth turned to me.

"Now tell me plainly and honestly how much this man owes you—or has mulcted you of during his vain and profitless life?"

"Nothing, madam."

"He has borrowed no money of you!—he has never forestalled his income?" she asked.

"You are *surprised*, madam," I said, not without a little exultation at confuting her former assertion.

"No," she responded, coldly, "only interested in your brother's inconsistency."

How pleased I felt that John had not taken the

money which I had proffered him at an earlier hour that evening.

"I told you that I had outlived amazement," she added, almost fiercely. "If you knew me better, you would believe me, Miss Casey. I am no boaster, and I never tell an untruth, therefore you need not have betrayed such genuine satisfaction at having—as you fancied—caught me tripping."

Having thus rebuked me, she turned to my brother, and drew forth from between the palm of her glove and her hand a strip of pink paper.

"There is your cheque for a hundred pounds, sir—now take yourself away. I am very tired of you—very!"

I had had a vain thought—a vain hope—that John would have refused the gift, and shown himself above her charity, which stung whilst it bestowed; but my brother was far removed from heroism, and money was an object to him then.

"Really—really, Mrs. Kingsworth," he stammered, "I did not expect this after—your explanation. I—I am very much obliged to you—thank you, madam—thank you very much."

He was the cringing fawner on the bounteous

giver after that—money had not ennobled him, but robbed him of all honest sense of self-support—he was the brother I had ever known, then! Mrs. Kingsworth folded her gloved hands upon her walking-stick again, and said:

"Good evening, Kingsworth. Please go now—I have already told you that you weary me."

Kingsworth bowed and retired. After a hurried excuse to Mrs. Kingsworth for my absence, I followed my brother to the street-door. He was anxious to escape from the house, and his nervous hands were already fumbling with the locks.

"Good night, Bertie, old girl," he said again; "I'm off in a hurry now—it must be getting very late—curse these two locks, I shall never understand them!"

"Going away for another twelvemonth, John?" I said, half-reproachfully.

"Not so long as that, I hope. Perhaps not twelve days—why should I fly from my best friends to my worst, because the money turns up again—no, I will not!"

"Keep your word, John."

"Trust me. And you—yours," he added, suddenly and earnestly.

"Mine?"

"To take care of Em—the girl whom you know that I want to get rid of, and who is a nuisance to me, and hampers me terribly. We'll talk of it another time—good night!—good night!"

On the steps he paused again to kiss me.

"She's an odd fish, Mrs. K.," he said laughing—what a good temper he was in now!—"the queerest old file out, I should say. A good sort, very likely—but, whew!—what a stinger. Upon my soul, Bertie, I wouldn't have stopped half an hour longer for a cheque double the amount. Let her have her own way till she goes."

He went away at a brisk step; I shut the door after him, and became aware for the first time of a small black travelling bag behind the door. I took it up in my hand, and returned with it to the sitting-room. Mrs. Kingsworth had changed her position, placed her gold-headed cane on the table, moved her chair to the fire, taken off her bonnet and shawl, and was sitting with her feet on the fender, quite at home and at her ease. A strange

figure to see in my parlour, so seldom troubled by visitors—a stranger and colder-looking woman now, with her grey hair pushed behind her ears, in which were glittering—first evidence of her wealth—two diamond ear-drops of an old-fashioned pattern.

"This is your bag, Mrs. Kingsworth?"

"Yes—is it not safe where I left it?"

"Safe enough, I believe, but——"

"Never mind—put it by the side of my bonnet, Miss Casey, and then favour me by a glass of sherry, and do all the honours of your inhospitable domicile."

"I beg your pardon," I hastened to say.

"Perhaps I am too severe upon you—I beg *your* pardon. Thank you, Miss Casey," she said, taking the wine I proffered her; "I am a little exhausted with my journey."

"You have travelled from Peterborough to-day, then?"

"Yes—I am not particular upon what day I travel. My boxes will not reach here till the morning, however."

"Your—your boxes, madam!"

"I shall stay a month with you at least—did

you think that I had taken a return ticket, and was going back by the night mail?" she asked.

"N—no, madam."

"Put some more coals upon the fire, then, and sit there facing me, and let us talk a little more of the future in store for you and me. The nights are very cold still."

CHAPTER IV.

A STRANGE PROPOSAL.

IT took some time to recover from Mrs. Kingsworth's final announcement; my brother was gone, and my reasoning powers inextricably confused. Mrs. Kingsworth to stay a month with me! —to deliver that announcement as a matter of course, to drop as from cloud-land upon my solitary home, and take her place by my fire-side, unsolicited, unwanted!

She had been my mother's friend; she was my brother's god-mother; she had spent much money on our family; an interest in the Caseys and their pursuits had possibly brought her a long journey; I could not tell her that she was unwelcome to my house, and that her pride, harshness, and bitterness, had only turned my heart against her.

Mrs. Kingsworth sipped her sherry for awhile in silence, then she focussed me with her piercing eyes again.

"Your brother Kingsworth must be a great trial to you, Miss Casey."

"I am sorry that he has no fixed pursuit——"

"Or legitimate occupation, exactly," she concluded; "it *must* be a trial—worse than knowing that he was dead."

"Oh! no."

"I would rather have a brother in his coffin than a brother like your own, were I a young woman with the world before me."

"My little world is not distressed by him, Mrs. Kingsworth."

"It will be," she answered; "as the time rolls on, and he goes further and further down the hill, the troubles which go with him must be shared by *you*."

"I will try and bear them."

"You are a fearless woman."

She looked dreamily at the fire, and, for several minutes, was lost in thought. Suddenly she turned to me again.

"You do not suppose that an old woman like me has travelled a hundred miles to pay your brother a hundred pounds?"

"No, madam."

"I have other motives—shall I tell you them now, or leave them till we are better acquainted with each other?""

"That must rest entirely upon your pleasure. You have had a long journey."

"I am not tired," she interrupted; "nothing tires me. I am a late riser, and I go to bed late as a rule. But do not let me force my idiosyncrasies upon you; that would be scarcely fair in a —guest."

"It is not very late yet."

"No."

"Let me see," she said, thoughtfully, "you were eighteen years of age last month, I think?"

"Yes, madam, eighteen," I replied, somewhat surprised at the accuracy of my companion's memory.

"Do you admire this situation of yours?"

"I have grown accustomed to it, of course."

"That is a different thing to admiring it. We

motives yet, and you, with a woman's quickness, have jumped at a misinterpretation of them. Understand me, in the first place, that your company would be of no service to me, brighten not one half-hour of mine, or chase away, even for an instant, those long weary trains of thoughts which weigh me down for ever. Your youth and my age are incompatible—I have said so before, but you were not paying much attention."

"What is required of me?" I asked, with some curiosity.

"Guardianship!"

"Of—of your brother's child, I presume?" I said, remembering her remarks before John had taken his departure.

"Yes—you *are* very sharp," said Mrs. Kingsworth, in almost an admiring manner. "Even such a place as this has not made you sleepy. In a different sphere you would become a very different woman. Miss Casey, you have guessed at the truth—I want you to take care of my niece."

"A responsible task, for which I should be wholly unfitted, I am sure."

"Do not be sure of anything in this world,"

commented Mrs. Kingsworth. "A more uncertain and vexatious world is not to be found in space. Now, my niece, the heiress to my estates and earthly possessions, finds Wilthorpe scarcely to her taste, the mistress of it still less so. And I find my niece—I find her at fifteen years of age——"

She stopped for a suitable expression, and failed in finding it. I waited patiently, but the sentence was never completed, and what Mrs. Kingsworth failed to discover was only guessed at by her subsequent discourse.

"A large house with no life in it, to a girl full of life, is naturally depressing—and a girl full of life is too great a trouble for me—even for her finishing governess, her father, and all who may be interested in her. A girl with some fine traits of character, but impulsive, wilful, rude, and passionate—what vulgar people term a 'limb,' in fact."

"How strange!"

"On the contrary, the most natural thing in the world."

But it was strange to me; in Wilthorpe or at the Corkcutters' Hall, there would be "a limb" to

encounter. Only a little while ago my brother John was speaking of the girl he called "Em;" of her wilfulness and bad tempers, and how I might subdue and mould her character anew—and here was Mrs. Kingsworth sketching in her niece what seemed to me a high order of the same class of ill-regulated girlhood.

"I dislike unnecessary trouble," continued Mrs. Kingsworth; "I have objected to it all my life. The trouble which has brought me hither I have considered necessary, for I never adopt a change upon the strength of an idea. My idea has always been that you were a steady, cool, unimpressionable, shrewd woman, but I have come to London to make sure that that idea, based partly on your mother's rambling letters to me, was not incorrect."

"You have judged rather hastily, Mrs. Kingsworth."

"My first impression never deceives *me*," was the egotistical reply to this; "and I am satisfied—perfectly satisfied—that you are the very person to take care of Isabel. Call yourself friend, companion, anything you like, but understand that you will be Isabel's guardian, nothing more nor less

than that. Your salary will be equal to that which you receive here; when I die, or when Isabel marries, the same amount will be yours for life, wherever you choose to go; but if you leave Wilthorpe before those *accidents* occur, then you will not expect any consideration on my part towards you. You——"

"Pardon me, Mrs. Kingsworth, but I have not yet agreed to accept so responsible a post—its nature is very different from the one I occupy—the change is startling, and I scarcely comprehend anything save that I should disappoint you and be of little service."

"You will return with me to Wilthorpe!" said Mrs. Kingsworth, decisively.

"No—I think not."

"I say 'Yes'—I am always right—I am sure that you will give up this place. Why, I have made up my mind, and your refusal would almost—I say almost—*surprise* me!"

"I would not have you build——" I began, when she checked me by that quick characteristic flash of her grey eyes, always demanding and exacting silence, as it were.

"There will be time enough to think of this," she said; "we will dismiss the subject for a day or two. Think that I wish it when the subject intrudes upon your mind, that I was your mother's friend, and was always—after my own unsympathetic fashion—your brother's friend and yours. The obligation must not be all on one side—remember that!"

She rose, went to the table, took up her bonnet and shawl, travelling-bag and stick, and prepared to depart without further ceremony.

"You will have supper after your long journey, Mrs. Kingsworth?"

"I never take suppers. Where is your maid?—what room shall she show me into?—have you thought about me at all?"

I had not thought of the sleeping accommodation which the Corkcutters' Hall afforded, for the reason that I was unprepared for Mrs. Kingsworth's intention of spending a few weeks with me until half an hour since. I did not explain this to Mrs. Kingsworth, but made the best of the unlooked-for circumstances.

"Let me show you to your room, Mrs. Kingsworth?"

She nodded her head by way of consent to that arrangement, and I led her upstairs to my own apartment.

"Your room," she said, after a quick glance round her; "I am putting you out, I think?"

"Oh! no," I answered, "pray don't think that."

"Good night, then—come upstairs softly, for I am a light sleeper, and if once disturbed, rest no more. Bear that in mind, Miss Casey, please."

"I will do so. Good night."

I slept that night in the spare room adjoining Mrs. Kingsworth, or, to speak more correctly, I tried to sleep, for the sudden break upon the even tenor of my way had disturbed my composure, not a little. The patroness was restless also; the walls were thin between us, and I could hear her talking strangely to herself, or muttering in her sleep—I knew not which.

CHAPTER V.

A LITTLE MYSTERY.

MRS. KINGSWORTH'S boxes arrived the next day; it was a stern truth that the patroness of the Casey family intended to remain with me some time. Evidently she was a woman of little consideration for other people's domestic arrangements, and did not stand upon the order of her—coming.

I made the best of it, and uttered no complaint; for many years my mother and brother had been indebted to her, and I felt that I could bear with her for a few weeks—and should even understand her better at their termination. Mrs. Kingsworth settled down, then—was not put out by my own ideas of housekeeping; even when I apologized for the homeliness of my table, she shrugged her shoulders,

and satirized me for my humility. Making the best of it did not put me completely at my ease; she was so watchful a woman, and I knew that she was studying me, and every trait of my character.

I was not anxious to please, to make any display, to appear the lady that I was not in her eyes; I remained, to all intents and purposes, my old self, and she was at liberty to like or dislike me—to repeat the offer made on her first advent, or by her reserve to imply that she had tacitly withdrawn it.

I thought that she had withdrawn it, she maintained for the first week so rigid a silence. On the night the offer was made I had only considered the disadvantages of life with Mrs. Kingsworth; woman-like, her new indifference now led me to reflect more seriously upon the offer which I had treated lightly.

Life in the country—to which I had looked forward in the days of my "old maidism," when I had saved more money, and been pensioned by the Honourable Corporation of Corkcutters, for instance—offered me at once! Life in the country,

which I loved for its very unapproachableness, free air and sunshine, in exchange for the close, stifling City lanes! Again, there was to be considered the dulness of my housekeeping life—what could be more dull and objectless than to be shut up in that great mansion year after year, knowing no change, making no friends, beginning my poor mother's life at sixteen years of age, and almost old-fashioned two years afterwards.

This was still life; Peterborough way, would present its life of action. A girl three years my junior for companion, eventually for friend; a country life, a good position, a fair income, an assured pension for life, and—Mrs. Kingsworth! The last item in the bargain did not scare me after a week's study of her in my own way; in a week I knew her better, and could see the glitter of some virtues through the hard case of her egotistical reserve.

She was my example of what a woman might become by isolation, want of sympathy, and absence from society. A proud austere woman, whose heart had narrowed in its isolation; who had been charitable—a generous giver—a woman anxious to

do good. Who had been misunderstood, and whose eccentric coldness had turned too-sensitive people away from her. In a word, an unhappy woman —and that unhappiness too visibly expressed in her demeanour, turned my heart towards her before the week was out. She had been a different woman once; my mother had spoken of her in old times as a woman to be loved; marriage had changed her as well my mother, and I knew—though she thought I was ignorant of the fact—that her choice had not been a wiser, better one than the friend against whom she railed. She had been simply a stronger woman, and resisted more —what her trials had been before her husband died, she knew, and she alone.

I became used to her. After a while even her acerbity was pleasant—it varied the monotony, and kept me brisk and sparkling. Her moods were somewhat variable, I discovered; there were silent moods, and there were loquacious and satirical ones. In the latter she had presented herself at the Cork-cutters' Hall, and somewhat dismayed me for a beginning; in the former, she awoke my interest, for her silence became deep and intense enough to

alarm me. She could pass in an instant to a world of her own, and become so rigid and statuesque over it, that my voice, and even touch, would fail to rouse her. Before or since her time I have never seen one think so deeply, so utterly submerge herself away from the present. It was a waking trance, and made me nervous.

At the end of the week—on a Sunday evening, after my return from church, to which she had declined to accompany me, "she was not always fond of church," she said, irreverently—I found her sitting in the one easy chair by the fire, twirling a three-cornered letter in her hand.

"I have had a visitor during your absence, Miss Casey," she said; "she would not wait for an answer. I think she must have been frightened at so old and grim a housekeeper."

"Did she say from whom she came?"

"Mr. Casey."

"It was Em, then."

"Is Em a wild-eyed girl in a grey merino?—a girl whose quiet attire is strangely at variance with her looks?"

Grey merino!—quiet attire! Em had come

dressed for company, then, and John Kingsworth Casey had not forgotten her when his cheque was cashed.

"Wild-eyed, perhaps—large black eyes, at any rate."

"The same, I should think. You might save time by reading the letter, however."

She passed the letter to me, and I hastily broke the seal.

"Oh! dear, what shall I do now?" I exclaimed; "read this, please."

A hurried letter, that had been scarcely decipherable to my eyes—that Mrs. Kingsworth, after inspecting at full length with one eye shut, and the other behind a large gold-rimmed glass, gave up in despair, and passed back to me.

"Incomprehensible hieroglyphics to me—will you attempt their interpretation?"

I read aloud—

"DEAR BERTIE,

"Detain the bearer. By any kindness, coaxing, or severity, keep her a prisoner in your house to-night, and break to her by degrees the

tidings that I have left England. I shall be absent nine months; when I return I will call upon you at the Hall, and see her and you. I have spared myself the pain of a scene by thus eluding her. I rely upon you to take care of her, make a good servant of her, bear with her as a help for my sake. At all events, in some way or other you can do her more service than

"Your fugitive brother,

"JOHN KINGSWORTH CASEY."

"Is that all?" asked Mrs. Kingsworth.

"Yes."

"A mild request, charming by its naiveté—a cool Casey-like epistle," she said; "do you understand it?"

"Yes. This girl he took pity upon after her father's death, I believe; he made her his servant, and saved her from the workhouse. He is too young, and she has become too old to wait upon him in his bachelor quarters—more than once he has asked me to find a place for her here, or anywhere away from him."

"I don't believe all this—do you?"

"Yes—why should I doubt him?"

"Because he is weak, false, and cloudy; fond of shabby little mysteries—concealing from you his mode of life—his style of home—the nature of his pursuits. Fond of these, or ashamed of them, it is difficult to say."

"Meanwhile, this girl whom he leaves in charge to me——"

"Well?"

"She will go home, find that he has deserted her—leave her, at her age, adrift on the streets."

"She will have her cue, doubtless—she will return hither."

"But if she keep away?"

"So much the better for you—one way or another, I see nothing to be surprised at in all this."

I was not alone surprised—I was excited. Only a week ago I had promised to take care of this girl—appreciated, as I thought, the motive which led him to a separation from her. And now the chance had perhaps passed away for ever.

"If I only knew his address, I could find my charge."

"Your charge!—you forget Wilthorpe, girl!" she said sharply.

"I have promised nothing—I have said nothing—I must see after this girl, standing alone in a dangerous world."

"You feel for her loneliness—for a girl unknown to you—*merely friendless and adrift.*"

"Yes. Why should I not?"

She did not reply; she rose and took her stick from its accustomed place by the chimney corner.

"Let us go in search of her, Miss Casey."

"Search for her in London!—you do not know the extent and bewilderment of these streets, madam."

"Oh! yes, I do," she said quietly; "long before your wonderful self made an appearance in the world!"

"But the address?"

"The address of your brother is 34, Whiffen Street, Spitalfields. Shall we adjourn thither?"

"You know—you know where he lives?"

"I can make a shrewd guess, you see. Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"Ask Mary for my bonnet and shawl, then—I will accompany you."

"Had I not better go alone?"

"No—I am a woman of the world, and can take care of you. Now, Donna Quixote—to the rescue!"

CHAPTER VI.

WHIFFEN STREET, SPITALFIELDS.

ALTHOUGH I objected to Sunday travelling, we took a cab as far as Whiffen Street, Spitalfields. Haste was one reason, reluctance to expose Mrs. Kingsworth to the fatigue of a long journey, another. My knowledge of the City "without" extended only to the Shoreditch end of Bishopsgate Street. After the first divergence I was lost. Bumping and jolting down Union Street, Spitalfields, and making our way past the noble church at the extremity thereof; taking the left road at the side of the church, and becoming after awhile submerged, cabman and all; time spent in searching for an intelligent aborigine; more information at last elucidated, and Whiffen Street finally discovered.

We drew up at No. 34, and I assisted Mrs. Kingsworth from the cab.

"Wait, please," she said to the cabman, and then looked up and down the street. A low-class street it was, even for a poor neighbourhood, and alive with noise, as such streets always are. Tall, gaunt houses on each side of the way, the upper stories, in many instances, a series of window-sashes, perched like dirty conservatories in mid-air. There were lights up there, and work going on in some instances in those grim forcing houses, where life is forced away—by hard competition and harder prices—at the weavers' looms. Children ran about the streets even at that late hour, or sat huddled together in the doorways, cowering from the cold, and waiting for father and mother to come home; the sallow, pinched faces of hard-workers gleamed from many open doors at the strange visitation of a cab on a Sunday night in that locality; men and women extra curious, the former with short pipes in their mouths, lounged towards us to participate in the last sensation, Spitalfields way!

"It's Loose-fish back agin, for tuppence!" yelled a diminutive boy in indifferent corduroys.

"No, it isn't," growled a deeper and huskier voice, "it's Loose-fish's mother come to supper with him."

Mrs. Kingsworth pressed my arm with the hand which she had laid upon it.

"He has gone, then," she said; "they mean him."

"Yes," I murmured.

We knocked at the door, with the motley group still interested in our proceedings. Had we been detective officers, a greater interest could not have been evinced in us.

A short, stout woman, with her cap awry, opened the door to our second summons—the first having proved a failure.

"We can understand one knock, two knocks, three knocks, four knocks in this 'ouse, marms," she said immediately, "but not worritings of knockers which brings us all out of our rooms at once and leads to rumpuses. What is it?"

"Mr. Casey—is he—" I began.

"Gone away to-night by train to Gravesend—

at least he says so. He says a might of things that no one believes in, so it mayn't be true," said this voluble female; "at all events, he's gone."

"And—his servant—Em, I think she is called," I said eagerly.

"Won't believe it, though every scrap of luggage has gone too—and though I've told her now the room is given up, she can't stay here after to-morrow morning. He took 'em on a Monday afore twelve o'clock, and he and all belonging to him, with their airs or no airs, will have to take themselves out of my house by that time percisely, or I'll have the law aginst them!"

"You are the landlady of this house?" asked Mrs. Kingsworth.

"Yes—I are."

"Show us to Mr. Casey's room, then, if you please. We are pressed for time."

Mrs. Kingsworth's decisive tones exercised their due effect upon the landlady, who, after one stare at the speaker, backed a little to admit us into the narrow passage.

"I don't mind showing you," she said, half a degree less irascibly, "though it's not my place

by no means, marm. It's up here, please," she added, leading the way up a dirty and dilapidated staircase; "here it's been some years now, as you know."

"Has he paid his rent?" asked Mrs. Kingsworth.

"It wouldn't have been here some weeks, if he hadn't. Now and then he ran back horful, but he fetched up somehow. He was a trying lodger, and a worser man for losing latch-keys, Gord knows —I don't. And to go a-moving away bag and baggage, all of a sudden, on a Sabbath night, the heathen—that *was* trying."

She continued to mount, discoursing volubly the while, and we to follow her. Mrs. Kingsworth's breath appeared to last longer than mine, for my heart was tightening unpleasantly when we reached the third landing-stage, and came to a full stop.

"This is the room—will you have the candle?—I don't suppose she's got a light."

"In the dark, then?"

"She flung it at me—brass candlestick and all, and said I was a liar for telling her that Casey had gone off without her. He managed well—he was

mighty sick of this forward, wicked gal of his."

"Wicked!—who says so?" I asked.

"Who don't say so, marm," rejoined the landlady; "who can help it, I should like to know?"

"Leave us," said Mrs. Kingsworth imperiously, and the woman, on whom Mrs. Kingsworth's manner had made an impression, took her departure, leaving the candlestick with me.

We knocked, and receiving no response, turned the handle of the door and entered. The scene was striking enough—even touching. The room was bare and unfurnished, save a bed rolled up in one corner of the room, and a rickety wash-stand, which began rocking with the vibration of our steps. On the floor, full-length like a dead woman, lay the girl I had twice seen, her face downwards, resting on one bent arm. Her bonnet and shawl lay on the floor some distance from her, and a mass of raven hair, which a duchess might have envied, was streaming over her shoulders, and on the bare boards whereon she had flung herself.

It was a picture of a desolate home, a desolate

heart. I see it now at times, and feel still the creeping horror that stole upon me as the thought that we might be standing in the presence of the dead checked the throbbing at my heart. The light glimmered faintly in my hand, and the pattern of the blindless window was thrown upon the shadowy floor from the gas light in the weaver's work-shop opposite. Mrs. Kingsworth was a woman of strong nerve; her coolness amazed me in this instance; after all, was she a woman whom nothing affected or surprised, as she had boasted once? She walked towards the girl, and touched her with her stick.

"Get up, child, and don't lie there," she said in accents that had a metallic ring in them.

The figure never moved, and I set my candlestick upon the floor, and kneeled beside it.

"Oh! Mrs. Kingsworth, if she's dead? *Em!*" I said, quoting the name by which my brother had called her, "don't you know me? I am Mr. Casey's sister, whom you came to see nine days ago."

Em suddenly struggled into a sitting posture, tossed back her hair, and, with her hands still

pressed upon the floor, looked back from me to Mrs. Kingsworth, then to me again.

"Where's he gone?" she gasped forth.

"I don't know—patience," I said, catching her by the shoulders and frustrating an impulsive movement to fling herself back into her old position, "we may know in time."

"He told you he was going away?"

"No."

"In his letter?"

"Yes."

"What was he afraid of?" she asked, "that he couldn't trust me he's knowed so long. Why didn't he say that he was tired of me, and I could have gone down the London Bridge steps and—IN!"

"Will you listen to me?"

"No, it's no good—you can't do any good to me! What do you come here for but to tell me what he said a year ago, and I would not believe in——"

"What was that?"

"That I was too big to stay with him—that people talked—as if I cared for that!—that they

would take my good name away—I never had any, I didn't want any! He was sick of me—I know that—but he was my father, friend, the only one who ever cared for me, and I couldn't go away because those—those devils downstairs talked harm of him. If I'd been his daughter, he couldn't—couldn't have been any better—kinder, and now —now—now!"

She beat her right hand upon the floor with the fury of a tigress; she raised her voice and screamed, till the window glass rang again. Mrs. Kingsworth touched her with the stick again.

"Stop that absurd noise—and listen to me."

"You're nothing to me!—what should I listen to you for?"

"Because I am an old woman, who has experienced all degrees of trouble, and may give you some advice worth attending to."

"I don't want any," was the sullen answer.

"Still, will you listen?"

No answer, but the restless hand clutching her throat now, and her great eyes fixed on the speaker. Mrs. Kingsworth took silence for consent, and resumed her discourse.

"Kingsworth Casey and you were father and daughter—brother and sister—nothing more, you say?"

"What more could we be?"

"I am not here to explain, but for explanation—I take your word—I think even by the light of that filthy candle I can read truth upon your face. What do you mean to do now?"

"Take poison, very likely," was the bitter answer.

"Take yourself off that floor, you mean, and come down-stairs with us."

"No—I'll stop here. He'll come back yet. Why, he was going to buy new things for these rooms, and sold off the old last Saturday."

"He will not come back—the letter which you brought this evening," I said, "was to tell us that, and to ask us—until his return"—I put in here—"to take care of you."

"Where's he gone?"

"Abroad."

"And he'll come back for me some day! Oh! if I thought he meant that!—if I could just think that, now!"

She held her head between her hands, and tried to press that thought into her brain. She was wavering, and I redoubled my efforts.

"The only chance of seeing him again is coming home with us—you cannot live here after to-morrow—you have no friends, you say?"

"No friends," was the hollow answer.

"Trust in John Casey's——"

"In Kingsworth Casey's," corrected the old lady.

"——Sister," I concluded. "You are young; this is a minor trouble; the service that I may place you in will be more regular and better for you. You do not think evil of my brother—you speak up for him, and know more concerning his good qualities than I—take me for your friend in his place."

"I speak up for him no more—I hate him now for running away like this—like a thief! I'll never say a word for him again! Oh! what will he do, poor Jack, with no one to take his part, I wonder!"

"Let us go now."

She got off the floor slowly and sullenly, picked

up her bonnet and shawl, and threw them on carelessly.

"Have you anything to pack up?"

"Very little—nothing. There's a little bundle somewhere; these"—indicating her present wearing apparel—"are new things which Jack bought me last week. There were some more things in the other room, where Jack used to sleep, but I tore 'em up. Oh! I could——"

Mrs. Kingsworth touched her with the stick again, and balked an impetuous stamping on the floor.

"Are you ready, then?" she asked.

"Yes, if you won't let me be, I'm ready. Sorry enough you'll be, Jack's sister, for taking me away from here. The wust job that ever you've done in your life is to notice a gal like me."

She moved towards the door with us, then stopped again.

"Oh! the money that Jack gave me to mind for him. What's to be done with it?"

"Where is it?"

"Somewhere—I pitched it somewhere. I hope

it ain't gone out of winder. I took it from my pocket and heaved it away."

She went back, looked in "Jack's room," and came back with a small sealed packet.

"Here," she said, thrusting it into my hands, "take care of it for him, I've done with it."

I opened the packet, and found three five-pound notes, and five pounds in sovereigns. In my brother's handwriting was written, "This for a rainy day. Keep this, and—keep strong!"

I showed the paper to her, but she snatched at it, crumpled it in her hand, and threw it on the floor; stooped and picked it up again, and thrust it in her pocket.

"He meant the money for me, I suppose—he never cared where he flung his money to—I'll drop down dead before I touch it!"

"Hush!—let us go."

We went out of the rooms, and down the stairs; on the second landing, whither perhaps she had scuttled upon the opening of the door, we found the landlady.

"What's to be done with the things, I should

like to know," said the landlady; "he's left a bed, a wash-stand, two——"

"They shall be fetched," said Mrs. Kingsworth; "nothing will be lost."

"If they ain't out of my house by to-morrow morning——"

"They shall go to-night," interrupted Mrs. Kingsworth.

Downstairs, and into the noisy street again; the cab before the door—the little group of unwashed still canvassing the topic of our appearance in Spitalfields.

Mrs. Kingsworth looked carefully at the faces within range. A hollow-eyed, sunken-faced man, shivering in his shirt-sleeves, and holding a child by one hand, arrested her attention.

"You've nothing better to do than waste time here?" she said.

"Wish I had," was the answer.

"Will you do something for us?—we are in a hurry."

His eyes lighted up at the prospect of a fee.

"Anything," he said.

"On the second floor you will find one or two

things belonging to us. Fetch them down. If we're not here when you come back, take them home, and keep them till they're sent for."

The man left his child on the door-step; Mrs. Kingsworth followed us into the cab.

"Drive on," she said; "let us get out of this fever-haunted street!"

"I was happy here," moaned our captive; "shall I ever be happy again?"

"How old are you?"

"Fourteen."

"Humph!—never!" was the old lady's consolatory answer.

CHAPTER VII.

CALLED BACK.

TAKING Em under my protection, sent my thoughts of becoming guardian to Mrs. Kingsworth's niece far away into the background. From that time I considered the matter settled; henceforth a housekeeper for life, with my brother's *protegée* in service under me! It had been John's wish that I should take care of her for his sake—for her own, for her wild affection for him, I was now interested in her. We took the girl home to the Corkcutters' Hall, and found a room and bed for her. She was anxious to get to sleep, she said—not to be "talked to" any more that night. She had assumed a sullen demeanour that did not care to be intruded on, and Mrs. Kingsworth and I made no efforts to rouse her from her apathy.

She refused all food and drink, and seemed only grateful for the little room into which I ushered her at last.

At the door, I said—

"You will keep with us?"

"Yes, till you're tired, as Jack was," she muttered.

"May I ask your name?"

"Emma Eaves."

"Good night."

"Good night."

Going downstairs, I thought again of the knowledge which Mrs. Kingsworth had possessed of my brother's address—that had ever been scrupulously kept from me. How did she discover it, and by what means, living apart from London? She put the mystery out of my head by her first question when I re-entered the room, and it was not till long afterwards that I remembered it again.

"Miss Casey, what is the day of the month?"

"The fourteenth of April."

"We'll enter it in our diaries. That girl said that we should rue the day we ever took her from her den. It is very likely."

"I hope not."

"I never believed in gratitude myself for any service given, at any sacrifice. I don't believe that a genuine gratitude exists in the heart of any man, woman, or child. If it exist, I have not met with it, that's all."

"Have you, in your long life, met with nothing but deceit, then?" I asked.

"With little else, Miss Casey," she said in an indifferent tone; "I have encountered fair professions, bland looks, earnest protestations, empty thanks at times—nothing more solid than those counters with which we play the game of life out. I was a young woman when I made this discovery; and old age, which brought me wisdom, only strengthened my conviction of human falsity."

"I am very sorry."

"What are *you* sorry for?" she asked.

"Sorry to find you sceptical of all good in the world, madam."

"I did not say that; good exists—I have seen it, and helped here and there to foster it in past times—but I have seen more evil, as was natural. I don't repine," she said; "I am resigned to hu-

manity, and there is an interest in attempting to decipher its motives—a weak interest, which will die out as I grow older, and which will never stir my blood or warm my heart again."

"This is akin to misanthropy."

"Call it what you please—I term it philosophy."

Hard and unimpressionable to passing events that startled less firm minds, she had proved herself; but not the woman indifferent to the future of those with whom she came in contact, I was certain.

The next day almost gave me proof of this, despite her admirable composure.

Early the next morning, before Mrs. Kingsworth came downstairs, a telegram arrived for her. I took it to her bedside with my own hands, lest there should be bad news for her, the suddenness of which might even unnerve *her*.

"Here is a telegram for you, Mrs. Kingsworth."

Mrs. Kingsworth was propped up in bed, steadfastly regarding the hangings above her head. Without looking towards me, she stretched forth her thin hand languidly.

"From the country, I suppose?"

She opened the envelope, and then passed the telegram to me.

"Read it, Miss Casey—it will save me a vexatious search for my glasses. From Wilthorpe?"

"Yes. It says—'*Bel is unmanageable—pray return.*'"

"Who sends this?"

"*Walter Mannington, The Hall, Wilthorpe,*" I read.

"Extra trouble always unnerved him. Fill up the form of acknowledgment and send away the bearer. No answer. Walter Mannington's a fool. A serious assertion to make of an only brother, but so entirely truthful, that the uncharitableness of my verdict will be forgiven, I trust."

I fulfilled Mrs. Kingsworth's commission, then paid a visit to Emma Eaves, sitting in the servants' room downstairs, sullen and taciturn still, and disinclined to move. On my return to the parlour I found Mrs. Kingsworth with her bonnet on.

"I am going back to-day," she said. "In half

an hour's time, send the maid for a cab, Miss Casey."

"Going back—to-day?"

"You will be sorry to lose me, of course?" she said, with a scornful quivering of her upper lip; "and the change and holiday for me—how *I* shall miss them!"

I did not reply; Mrs. Kingsworth in an acrid mood was an unpleasant being to discourse with.

"You are sparing of the compliments suitable for the occasion," she said, after a pause.

"I have no compliments to offer—I shall miss you."

"Miss a querulous old woman!—the most hateful specimen of humanity one can thrust upon society —oh! yes, you will miss her!"

"I did not mean in that sense."

"No matter. Shall we proceed to business?"

"To business?"

"When am I to expect you at Wilthorpe?"

"I—I thought that you had relinquished the idea of my coming to your home."

"I never relinquish an idea that I have formed," was the cool answer, "it is unlike me. I have

made up my mind—have you made up yours?"

"I have considered the proposition, Mrs. Kingsworth. I am obliged by it, but there is Emma Eaves to consider now."

"Bring her with you, of course. There is plenty of room in the household for your charge as well as for yourself. I expect her."

"And there is——"

"Nothing to stop you, if your heart be set upon being of service to me in my old age. Bertha Casey, I, your mother's friend, ask you to come!"

It was an appeal that I could not resist; of late I had grown tired of the monotonous life in office, and there was an indefinable temptation leading me to the unknown life beyond its peace and rest.

"I will come," I answered.

My heart sunk, though; after I had replied to her appeal, I could almost have retracted, begged for longer time and deeper consideration.

"Thank you," she answered, "you will do me a service—more than me, I hope, in the good time when we shall know each other better. Remember all conditions; write me a line two days before

you start for Wilthorpe; and now—send for my cab, business is over for the day."

She departed shortly afterwards in the cab which my maid had brought to the steps of the Cork-cutters' Hall. Before she left, she called Emma Eaves to her side and said:

"In a month's time you are coming in the country with Miss Casey. There, a new life for you!"

The girl stared at her, but replied not.

"Good-bye," Mrs. Kingsworth said to me, and then went down the steps, into her cab, and away.

"In the country?" said Em, turning to me suddenly. "How will Jack find us out?"

"We will arrange that by leaving our address behind us here. You will like the change."

"I shall like nothing!" she answered.

* * * * * * *

In a month's time we went away. I gave notice of resignation to the Honourable Company of Corkcutters, and received a kind letter, expressing the regret of the Corporation at the receipt of the intelligence, at the prospect of losing one, whose

services—so it said—had been so generally and gratefully appreciated. All this, on the best creamlaid letter-paper, with the arms of the Corporation stamped in blue and silver relief thereon, like a highly-illuminated twopenny piece. I was proud of the Company's gratitude, however, of its formal thanks, regrets, and so forth; I found the letter amongst my old papers only a little while ago, and cried over it like a great silly!—wondered over it too, what would have become of me if I had held my ground there, and remained content with my station? Would life have flowed on peacefully, I ruminated; or even to that quiet, old-fashioned remnant of City greatness, would there have stolen much to trouble and dismay me? Should I have found more happiness, or less?—made more friends, or lost more?—been even there misunderstood by those whose hearts I sought to touch, and drawn amidst a crowd of incomprehensibilities to a world wherein I knew nothing myself, and grasped but vainly at the shadows flitting by?

And yet do I look back with regret at the new life I sought of my own free will?—at the faces

that met me in the home at Wilthorpe, and the life spent there? Scarcely.

It unsettled me to give up my quiet life, and perhaps I never wholly after that settled down again!

END OF THE FIRST BOOK.

BOOK II.

BEGINNING LIFE AFRESH.

CHAPTER I.

MR. MANNINGTON.

ON the sixteenth of May, Emma Eaves and I arrived in Peterborough. We had quitted the Corkcutters' Hall for ever; my new address at Wilthorpe had been left with the clerk, with the servants, with the secretary to the Corporation, and with the Corporation itself; John Kingsworth Casey should have no difficulty in finding me out again, whenever his brotherly love desired the discovery. That would be about Lady-Day, I thought, with a sigh—not before, unless anything strange and unforeseen should happen in the interim.

I had given warning to Mrs. Kingsworth of my coming, as requested; but had received no answer in reply. She had ever proved herself a bad correspondent, and her silence did not disturb me

much. We set out at ten o'clock from the Cork-cutters' Hall, and reached Peterborough at one; thence to Wilthorpe would be a matter for reflection, supposing that Mrs. Kingsworth had not sent a conveyance for us.

"How many miles is it, Miss Bertha?" Emma Eaves had asked.

"Nine or ten, I believe."

"Can't we walk it?"

"And leave our boxes and fine things to the mercies of a booking-office, and arrive tired and disagreeable?"

"Jack—your brother and *me*, I mean" she corrected, "used to have a long walk—right to Edmonton—sometimes. That was a long while ago, though," she sighed.

Emma Eaves and I had become very good friends; I had found her, despite her self-will and sullen fits, an impressionable girl—a girl upon whom a bright smile, a good word, was never lost, despite the appearances, which occasionally seemed against the effort. She had turned to me after awhile; next to the man who had taken pity upon her when her father died, was that man's sister,

and my interest in her was soon reciprocated.

"You had a way with you, you see," she condescended to explain, as a reason for softening—an odd reason that I understood, and considered as a compliment.

Possibly in those days I was vain of "my way;" we are all vain of something or other, and concerning my way of managing matters, of winning friends, of settling differences, I was conceited, just a little! I was weak enough to imagine that Mrs. Kingsworth had taken to me on account of "my way;" that Emma Eaves would be faithful and true to me all the days of my life; that everybody with whom I came in contact would think what a nice, amiable, comfortable little soul I was. So we deceive ourselves with vain imaginings, and sow the seeds of future disappointments; we must take our life as we find it, step by step, not map it out ahead of us. For the future there is no preparation.

At the Peterborough station, I left Emma to look after the boxes—she was a sharp girl, not to be put off with other people's *débris*—and went out of the station to look round me, and see if any

vehicle without there was suggestive of a Kingsworth's thought of us. On Mrs. Kingsworth's letters I had been mindful of a crest—a bravo-looking leopard, with a dagger in his paw—and I looked for the family arms on the one or two private carriages outside the station.

I was returning to Emma, when some one from an elevated position touched the crown of my bonnet—my best bonnet, too!—with his whip. I looked round, and saw a very diminutive old gentleman, perched in a dog-cart, smiling and smirking at me. A glance at the dog-cart—chocolate, silver-mounted, and, on closer inspection of the side panel, the identical leopard still slicing mid-air with its dagger—and then I turned to the gentleman again.

"Am I right?—Miss Casey?"

"Yes, sir."

"Thought I could not make a mistake—fancied that you would look about you for awhile—had your description, of course, powerfully struck off by my dear sister Charlotte, Mrs. Kingsworth that is. What a charming day!—is it not?"

"Very."

"Thought this sort of thing," pointing to the dog-cart, "preferable to a close carriage—always fond of air myself. When I can rely upon a quiet horse I enjoy driving amazingly—when the animal is restive I get the cold shivers. Disagreeable sorts of things cold shivers are—as you are doubtless aware, Miss Casey?"

"Very disagreeable indeed, sir."

I was not quite at my ease yet with this voluble gentleman, who had dashed head-foremost into conversation in a remarkable manner.

"I am Mr. Mannington, of whom you have heard, I daresay," he said getting down from the dog-cart and raising his hat to me; "we shall be the best of friends, Miss Casey—you'll like *me* very much. Everybody likes me, because I put up with everybody's nonsense, I suppose—he! he!"

"Sir?"

This interrogatively, being in doubt whether he had added another word after his supposition, or really attempted a laugh.

"I said 'he! he!' Miss Casey," he explained; "merely my humorous way, you know—or rather you will know when we're better acquainted.

Here, boy, *boy*, BOY, BOY!" he screamed after a shock-headed youth in a green smock frock, "stay one moment, if you please."

The boy looked round with his hands in his pockets, and his lower jaw dropped; hesitated, and then slouched towards us.

"Hold my horse, my lad—you know how to hold a horse, I suppose—like this, you see—not like that, you see, because it worries the mouth. And just mind that that cloth don't slip off the mare, there's a good lad, and—and keep your eye on that whip and wrapper, will you? Now do take your hands out of your pockets—if there's one thing more than another that fidgets me, it's a boy in a responsible position with his hands in his pockets. Let me see, now, I think that I have told you all, excepting that you must not allow anybody to touch the mare, of course, because it fidgets her—and if they will not mind what you tell them, just call a policeman, my lad. I shall not detain you long—NOW, allow me, Miss Casey."

He offered me his arm, then broke into a little canter by my side, and escorted me back to the station. He made several inquiries concerning my

boxes, *en route*—what they were like, what was written upon them, size, shape, and general style of cordage; he appeared deeply interested in my luggage, and had button-holed a guard with the intention of giving him my full description at second-hand, when Emma came to tell me that everything had been collected and was ready for removal.

"Your maid, I presume," he said, taking his hat off again, to the intense petrification of Emma Eaves; "a very clever girl, to have got the boxes ready for us—I never could find boxes myself at a railway station—people get in the way so, and the guards are very rude at times—very. It has always struck me that no one should be too busy to be civil, because incivility wounds one's feelings deeply; and in the hurry of going or ending a journey of five or six hundred miles, you cannot find the time always to mention that fact—and, after all, it may be due to individualization of character—don't you think so?"

"I think it is very likely," I ventured to respond.

"Then we'll see about the boxes—three, you say? —one with brass nails—oh! here they are, all on a

truck, I see! Bless my soul, now, what shall we do with them? Dear, dear, dear, I don't exactly see the way to take them to Wilthorpe—one can go on end, and another under the feet—no, the other on end, and that one under the feet—and the third will fall into the road, and altogether it will look very ridiculous—he! he!"

The little gentleman was quite confused by the boxes; he bit the tips of his white driving gloves; he took off his hat, brushed his hair, dropped my arm, and executed a solemn march sideways round the luggage, the truck, and the guard who was in charge; he evidently did not see the way to Wilthorpe with those boxes.

"I think, Miss Casey, that the better plan will be to—to send for them, or to have them sent after us. They'll be very inconvenient, and——"

"Be they for Wilthorpe, sir?" asked the guard.

"Yes, my man—yes."

"I'll see to 'em—the Hall, ain't it, sir?"

"Yes, my man—the Hall. I leave it entirely in your hands, understand—the boxes are all properly addressed, and there's no occasion to make a mistake, unless you do it on purpose."

"All right, sir."

"He says it's all right, Miss Casey—now, if you will allow me again."

We left the boxes with the guard, who surveyed us very blankly—his expectations of a fee having been considerably raised by Mr. Mannington's complaisant manner. He was not allowed to receive gratuities, and he never did receive them, only under protest.

We were outside the station again, with Mr. Mannington assisting us into the vehicle. His assistance was demonstrative enough, took some time, and attracted the attention of all loiterers; he was anxious about the cushions, about the steps, about the wrappers, about the proper position of Emma Eaves at the back, about everything connected with the final preparations, that he could possibly disturb his mind concerning. Then there was the mare to see to, and the bit to inspect, and, finally, a general survey of the affair in its entirety before he stepped briskly into his place beside me, took his whip and reins in one hand, and began feeling in his pockets for some remuneration for the boy, now watching the last operation attentively.

"Sorry to have kept you so long, my lad, but better to be earning your living than idling about the streets, isn't it? You're too big a boy for this work, though, and ought to get apprenticed somewhere. There, my man, there's a penny for you, and don't spend it wastefully. Now let us be moving homewards."

"Well, I'm darmed!" ejaculated the youth, turning the penny over contemptuously in his hand —"all that jaw for a penny!"

Mr. Mannington did not hear him; he half closed his eyes in an odd near-sighted manner, and drove on with a set smile on his face. Full of the responsibility of getting out of the broad streets of the city of Peterborough, he was for a while silent, and afforded me leisure to observe him.

A little man, I have said—almost the shadow of a man, I might have said, so thin and fragile was he. A shrewd-faced man enough, with a faint resemblance to Mrs. Kingsworth about his thin red lips. A face more wrinkled than his sister's, cut up, in fact, by wrinkles which ran right and left, and intersected each other, and gave him a shrivelled

appearance, which his fragile proportions did not tend to diminish. He had been in India, Mrs. Kingsworth had said, and possibly had stayed out in the sun too long there, and dried up too much in consequence.

He was Mrs. Kingsworth's junior by a few years, I was aware; looking at him from behind, he might have passed for Mrs. Kingsworth's little boy, until he turned and scared you with his world-worn face. He was dressed youthfully; he followed the fashions still, and a strict study of them only becomes youth, who loses caste in society if he's cut the wrong way. Mr. Mannington was well-dressed, but he raised a smile; more than once, as I thought of the odd appearance my cavalier must present to the country folk on the road, I had to bite my lips to keep decorous. His French hat, which was very much curled at the brim, was out of place; his light grey coat, loosely put on over his black coat, with an azalea in the top button-hole, was striking; and his cream-coloured neck-erchief, with a ruby breast-pin flickering in the sun's rays, was absolutely dashing. He wore patent leather boots and light trousers, and his

white driving gloves were new for the occasion, and fitted excellently well.

Absorbed in the mare he drove, watchful of corner stones, full of gesticulation to half-sleepy drivers of carts and waggons making for Peterborough, he was silent a longer time than I had anticipated. I had leisure to look round me, and think what a fine open country it was beyond the old cathedral, which now loomed from the pile of house-roof in the distance.

It was my first sensation of "the real country"; of being a long way from London smoke and City turmoil—it was beginning my new unknown life at once, and under favourable auspices. The sky was a deep blue, dotted here and there by piles of swan's down floating lazily with the faint breeze astir that day. The trees and hedge-rows were in their first flush of greenness, bright, and full of colour; the land beyond was "looking well," I felt assured, both to artistic eyes and farmers'; there was a river meandering through the landscape, a strip of molten silver, which added a pleasant feature to the scene; all breathed of peace and rest, and I fancied—such odd fancies steal across one's

reverie at times—that I should be happy and content here!

Leaning back to speak to Emma disturbed the companion at my side, who woke up from his study of the mare, and paid me more attention.

"You like the country, Miss Casey?"

"I have never seen it before."

"Indeed, now!—not a traveller, then, like myself, wandering from one end of the earth to the other, and seeing everything worth seeing, everywhere! A real Londoner, Miss Casey?"

"Yes, Mr. Mannington, a thorough Londoner."

"I was a thorough Londoner myself when I was a young man," he said, "a clerk in a City house, afterwards a partner, then manager of our foreign branch. A fine place the City of London; rare opportunities for fortune-making and—breaking."

"Yes."

"You were at the Corkcutters' Hall, my sister tells me. Housekeeper?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very young to be a housekeeper, Miss Casey—not eighteen yet, I should say?"

"In my nineteenth year."

"Dear me!—well, I'm not far out in my guess—I never was. And your mother was housekeeper to the Corkcutters' Hall also, doubtless? Many a time have I dined at the Corkcutters' Hall, and rare dinners they used to give in the good old times. Housekeeper too—and your grandmother, now?"

"I do not remember her, sir."

"Housekeeper also, very likely. City people like generations of that sort of thing—it looks respectable and sound."

"My grandmother was a lady, I believe. We took to housekeeping when our losses came."

"Dear, dear me! Losses! what losses were they, now? I never like to hear of losses—they depress one's spirits so much."

I did not answer. My family losses I knew but little concerning; the story of them had been too painful to dilate upon, and my mother had always shunned the subject. I knew something of an unhappy marriage that my mother had made; of a quiet life that followed it, and wherein she hid her own sorrow, and thought of other people's; of the

utter unselfishness that turned away from personal distress, and calmly and equably pursued a way that kept distress from me—and tried to shield poor John.

"Your mother and Mrs. Kingsworth were old friends—very dear old friends, it appears," continued Mr. Mannington. "How singular that I never met with your mother, or knew of this strong attachment between them! An early friendship—for late friendships don't last, or make sacrifices in a hundred different ways—do they?"

"I don't know—the earlier friendships are the better ones, no doubt."

He looked furtively from the corner of the eye adjacent to me, and put me on my guard—almost instinctively—against his further questioning. A courteous man, conversational and agreeable, but evidently curious on most topics, and inclined to sift to the bottom a matter that perplexed him. Mrs. Kingsworth had evidently not entered into details concerning her past friendship with my mother, and he was anxious to know the exact degree of intimacy—how it had begun,

and by whom, and in what way? I could not explain to him, and he gave up the subject.

Each topic that he dwelt upon, however, became equally embarrassing after awhile, he drove the details so persistently into a corner. He asked if I had any brothers and sisters; and upon my answering a brother, became deeply interested in him, his antecedents, his age, his present pursuits, even his mode of living and general deportment. Lastly, he wanted to know all about my maid, sitting within ear-shot on the back seat, and looked at me as if I were deceiving him when I told him that I had only known her a month.

"You are a lady easily impressed, then?" he said; "one who takes strong and strange fancies."

"I think you are wrong, Mr. Mannington."

"I do not say that I am quite right," he answered; "there were reasons, of course, for a sudden attachment to your maid—a very amiable and lovable girl, perhaps? That article does exist, I believe," he added, a faint tinge of his sister's satire suddenly exhibiting itself, "although I have not met with it myself."

"I am sorry for your experience of life, then."

He looked at me sharply, and then edged a little away from me, as though my reply—somewhat cold in spite of myself—had frightened him. He coughed for a moment in an embarrassed manner, and said—

"An amiable and lovable girl is a great treasure, of course. Candidly, Miss Casey, I do not possess it yet awhile in my daughter Isabel. Mrs. Kingsworth and I count a great deal on your future influence over her."

"Pray do not!" I exclaimed; "I am young myself—no judge of character—no powers of command. You do not expect me to mould your daughter at fifteen years of age into a different being?"

"Before she is twenty—why not? She only wants studying; Mrs. Kingsworth won't study her, because she—she never studied anybody, that I am aware of—and I can't, for I'm of a nervous temperament, and a very little unsettles me, and gives me the heartburn. Have you ever had the heartburn, Miss Casey?"

"Yes—I think so."

"Think so!—good gracious!—why it's a red-

hot sixpence in the middle of the chest, or a trifle nearer perhaps the pit of the—God bless me!—of the junction thereto, and so on. Are you tired with your journey?" he asked, anxious to dismiss an embarrassing topic upon which he had intruded.

"Not very tired."

"Railway travelling to persons unused to it is very fatiguing," said he; "I should have fancied that the journey would have distressed you more. Any news in town to-day?"

"Not that I am aware of."

"You come first-class, of course?"

"No, second."

"I like economy—you couldn't have done better."

He continued to rattle on during the remainder of the journey; his topics of conversation were inexhaustible, his anecdotes of his personal experience, numerous. It must be confessed that I grew weary of him; that I was very sorry in my heart that this man at all times and seasons would be thrown in my way, and weary me with his obtrusive fidgetiness and garrulity. Even in that early period of our acquaintance, I imbibed a

habit of submerging his ideas, and keeping my own uppermost, steering cleverly through the shoals of my own inattention, and answering in monosyllables, when a reply became necessary on my part. We got on very well after that, although Mr. Mannington was full of a long history of how he had cured of bronchitis the mare he was driving then, and I was thinking of the welcome that awaited me at Wilthorpe, and whether I should like it, after all.

It was nearly half-past three o'clock when we passed through a long and straggling village, in the midst of which a hunchbacked church, with a wooden steeple, stood pre-eminent.

"A pretty place," I said; "is this——"

"Wilthorpe," he concluded; "yes."

A bend of the road, a drive of another hundred yards; another bend of the road, shadowed by six fine elms that were in glorious leaf then, and finally "The Hall," a castellated residence of some extent, lying far back from the dusty road in its own fair park-land, where deer were browsing that May afternoon. A pretty scene to come suddenly upon—all symbolical of comfort and

even happiness, judging by the bright exterior.

"Emma," I said, pointing to the Hall, "there's home!"

Emma nodded; she was thinking intently, and even the mention of home did not excite her very much, though she kept her gaze directed towards the residence of Mrs. Kingsworth.

Mr. Mannington answered for her.

"Yes, there's home. Strange that a girl should conceive so great a distaste for so comfortable a place, and not have the courtesy to disguise it," he said absently; "and all round here right and left is the Kingsworth estate, where there is rare shooting in the autumn months."

"And the cottage on our left, facing the lodge-gates?"

"That's our land-bailiff's quarters — Master Stewart's house. And here's Master Stewart himself—that's odd!"

CHAPTER II.

THE HALL—WILTHORPE.

A THICK-SET man in a dark velveteen coat and a Scotch cap came across the road towards us. He looked from Mr. Mannington to me, and from me to Emma, without saluting either of the three, and then became deeply interested in the horse, which he set himself to study intently, with his legs a little apart and his hands behind him.

He was a fierce-looking man with a brown and bushy moustache, eyes somewhat sunk in his head, forehead rather prominent—a man of middle height, and whose age was difficult to guess at.

"You'll kill that mare, Mr. Mannington," he said curtly.

"Bless me!—what makes you think so, Master Stewart?" said Mr. Mannington, leaning over the chaise and surveying the quadruped in his turn.

"You've driven her too fast, and you've got the bit wrong, and the collar is chafing her shoulder."

"That Tom always was a stupid!"

"Yes—that's true."

"When did you return from Edinburgh? I was down here this morning trying your door."

"Very likely," was the dry response; "I've been home two hours, or thereabouts."

"Found your brother well, I hope?"

"Yes, thank you."

Mr. Mannington whipped his horse again, Mr. Stewart looked from the horse to the driver, then to me and Emma again, and turned away, unconcerned in any of us.

"That's our clever man in these parts, Miss Casey," he said, "but a man you'll very much dislike."

"I hope not. I don't like disliking any one," I answered, not very elegantly.

"Oh! nobody likes him."

"Indeed!"

"He's an ill-tempered man."

"More ill-tempers!" I thought to myself.

"Don't make himself agreeable, and everybody ought to be agreeable, and conversational, and *communicative*. He's a clever man at his own business, certainly—and at minding his own business, too, he said to me once. Very rude, very uncouth, wasn't it?"

"Very."

"I think his head has been turned by his brother's good fortune; little Dick Stewart—that's the name he goes by in these parts, although he's actually taller than I am—thinks a great deal of his brother. Long Mark Stewart, they called the brother before he went away from here. I had the pleasure of seeing him once, just for a minute, when I first came hither—don't think much of *him* myself. He's the Mr. Stewart—that uncivil personage we have just left is the Master Stewart. Mr. Stewart's twenty-seven—this party's twenty-nine, though I don't believe it, mind you—and that's all *I have found out*."

"Found out?" I repeated.

"Not exactly found out," he corrected, "for I

am not of a curious disposition. But that's all Mrs. Kingsworth knows or cares."

We were winding our way along a circuitous drive towards home; a sudden turn brought us in front of the Hall, a noble and castellated edifice of limestone, whilst on our left was a sweep of park land—the home-close I afterwards learned was its name—with a view of Mr. Stewart's cottage in the distance.

Under the porch, castellated also, and approached by a broad flight of steps, two figures were awaiting us, in that true old-fashioned style, which warmed the heart to those who offered welcome. Mrs. Kingsworth, in the same rusty silk she had invariably worn at the Corkcutters' Hall, was leaning on her gold-headed cane with one hand, and with the other supporting herself by the arm of a dark-haired, dark-skinned girl of fifteen or sixteen years of age. Strange contrast in the two faces underneath the porch—in one the stern gravity of age, full of dignity, but expressive of no pain or pleasure at the sight of us—in the other a wild concentrative interest, even eagerness, which arched the neck, and even agitated the face.

Mr. Mannington assisted us to alight—Mrs. Kingsworth touched my hand with hers without relaxing her hold of the stick, murmured "Welcome to Wilthorpe," and then brought her companion more into the foreground, despite a shrinking shyness on her part.

"Miss Casey, I wish to introduce you to Miss Mannington, a young lady with whom you will become intimately acquainted, I hope. It is my wish, at least."

Miss Mannington and I bowed; the large eyes never left my face, which she seemed to wish to fix indelibly upon her memory.

"You will show Miss Casey to her room adjoining yours," said Mrs. Kingsworth. "We dine in an hour—we shall not expect to see either of you before dinner. Well, Emma Eaves, you *have* come, then?"

"Yes."

"I thought that you would have run away before this; I am not always right, it seems. I will show *you* to your room myself—this way."

This was the welcome to our new home.

CHAPTER III.

ISABEL.

MISS ISABEL MANNINGTON led the way to the room reserved for me on the first floor —"my little room" from that day forth. A large room by comparison with my old bed-chamber in the Corkcutters' Hall, but after awhile appearing small to me, judging by more capacious apartments in this old-fashioned edifice.

There were really two rooms, a bed-room and dressing-room, well and even richly furnished, the hangings, perhaps, a trifle too dark and sombre to my taste, but the windows commanding fine views of park-land and distant country, bright and exhilirating enough in that late spring-time.

"This is your room," was the quick, almost impatient answer; and then Isabel Mannington

dropped wearily into a chair by the dressing-table, rested her elbow upon the table, her chin in her hand, and proceeded once more to attentively examine me.

"Thank you," I said, by way of hint that I could dispense with her attendance now; but she continued to sit there, and to stare at me, until an uncomfortable nervous feeling took possession of me.

There was no getting rid of her steady, curious gaze; I was quite a study for her; wherever I moved, the eyes of Miss Mannington followed me, losing me not for an instant, and never tiring of their interest.

"I am detaining you," I said, at last.

"Not at all, Miss Casey," was the reply. "I am here on duty. I have received my instructions from my aunt, and it is more than my place is worth to disobey them."

More than her place was worth! I saw the red lip curl a little scornfully at her own words; did this girl resent my presence here already, and had I made the first grand mistake in life in coming hither? I felt my heart sink at her curt replies,

and the magnitude of my task for the first time began to impress itself upon me.

However, I did my best to maintain my composure, and to Isabel's incipient antagonism I betrayed not any outward sign of embarrassment.

"You dine at five here as a rule, Miss Manningston?" I asked.

"As a rule—yes."

I was thinking of another question to put to her—trying to start a topic which might draw her out a little more, and soften that peculiar hardness which she had assumed, and which did not seem quite natural to her, even in those early days for judging, when she said:

"Mrs. Kingsworth is not particular about evening dress—full evening dress—when company is not expected. She is homely—oh! very homely in her ideas sometimes."

"I suppose Mrs. Kingsworth sees but little company here?" I said.

"Now and then we catch a—victim," she answered quite satirically.

Seeing my glance of surprise at her, she laughed. For the first time her intent look vanished, and was

replaced by a brightness—even a lightness—which wholly changed her. Then the shadow fell again upon that dark face, and she was staring hard once more.

"You spoke of instructions a few minutes since, Miss Mannington," I said. "May I ask what they are, and whether I am concerned in them?"

"Yes, you may ask," she replied shortly. "I mustn't disobey you, and of course I am bound to give you a reply. I'm only a child yet, my aunt says, and ought not to have a will of my own. When I'm a woman I shall make an effort to obtain a little one, I think."

"And the instructions?"

She laughed again—this time somewhat bitterly and mockingly.

"I was to remain with you till dinner-time," she said; "to prove to you by that time what an interesting child I was, and to find in you—what do you think?"

"Some one in whom you could be interested also, I hope."

"Some one with all the virtues of the angels—a good, amiable, pious young lady, whose manners I

was to imitate, whose heart I was to touch, whose every word I was to reverence, and whose example in everything I was to profit by. So I am watching you, and trying to—make you out, Miss Casey!"

"You will not find that a very difficult task," I answered.

Miss Mannington shook her head dubiously. When should I make her out, I wondered; was this acting, I thought, or was there throughout this family a vein of acrid humour, that was apparent in each member, and made the blood tingle in the veins of one subject to it?

"No mystery about you, Miss Casey?" she asked; "no secret resolve to keep me down, and crush the spirit out of me, despite the blandness of that face of yours?"

This more impetuously, with her hand leaving her chin to beat a little tattoo on the dressing-table. This with a flushed face also, and her dark eyes sparkling somewhat.

"You speak as if you expected me to be your enemy, rather than your friend, Miss Mannington. You will pardon me also, but you speak rudely,"

I added, with a flash of spirit asserting itself, despite my effort to be cool and ladylike. I had not felt so inclined to be "warm" for a long, long period.

"You must not come to Wilthorpe Hall for soft speeches, Miss Casey," Isabel said in a less bitter tone of voice. "You, who know my aunt, surely did not expect that?"

"I expected kindness here. I did not anticipate harsh words, or a harsh judgment upon me, quite so early."

"You have judged me—you have been told what I am!"

"Your aunt has spoken of you as of a daughter whom she dearly loves."

"Has she?" was the eager question; "perhaps I am wrong, then—perhaps you are not to be my stern custodian—my aunt's spy?"

"Spy!" I ejaculated.

"Pardon me," she said hastily; "I am not courteous in my speech—I know it—I have been ill-trained, neglected—I know that too! But they don't understand me here—don't make allowances for what I have been, and what I am. They're all against me

—everyone of them—and will not consider that I am sixteen years of age, *nearly*, and not disposed to cringe, and flatter, and behave prettily when I don't choose. I'm not a bad girl, Miss Casey—until twelve months ago I have had my own way in everything, and now comes the curb, or rather the chain, to hold me down, and I can't have it—I will not have it!"

"I do not understand," I said, taking advantage of a pause for breath to break in here; "all is intended for your good, I daresay, but you are excitable and inconsiderate, perhaps."

"So was my mother, I am told—it's the legacy she left me, and I can no more shake it off than I can shake off this ugly head of mine," she said; "and I wish you to understand, Miss Casey, that I am independent here, and not to be lectured on everything I do. I cannot bear it, for my aunt's sake—how can I bear it for the sake of her money, which I hate!—which I don't want!"

"Who asks you to be obedient for her money's sake?"

"Don't ask me," she said moodily.

"I will ask you—when we are better acquainted,

Miss Mannington—to be a little more patient for your own."

"Not for yours, then?"

"And for mine," I added; "and then you will understand your friends here, and be better able to appreciate their motives."

"I am never unfair."

"Is it quite fair to treat me with this acumen—this ill-feeling—on so early an acquaintance, before I have settled down here, and asked you to be my friend, in a world that is strange and new to me?"

She paused, and looked steadily at me again.

"I beg your pardon—no, that was *not* fair."

"A fair acknowledgment, at least," I said; "we shall be friends yet, I hope."

"Friends!" she answered; "oh! I shall never be able to trust you—all my life I shall be afraid of you and my aunt, till I marry and go away from here."

"Marry!—well, there will be time enough for——"

"Yes, yes, I know what you are going to say," she interrupted; "everybody says that, of course. But I am looking forward to a life a little different

from this. It does not suit me—it is dull, monotonous—they are all too old and unsympathetic for me—is not that natural?"

"But you have friends?"

"I have been here six months—they are like six years to me already," she said; "they call this home to me now, and I am to settle down here and never feel discontented ever again. Well, I must try for awhile. I'm sorry that you think I'm rude."

"Shall we say plain-spoken?"

"Is that a virtue?"

"Not always."

"Why should it not be?—truth is a virtue?"

"Always. We'll speak of the distinction some day," said I; "it's too early for argument at present."

"I hate argument, because I always get the worst of it."

"A better reason for one antipathy than you have exhibited for *another*."

"Ah!" she said, "you wish to prey upon my feelings—that's my aunt's way. Well, I was in the wrong, but I wanted you to understand what

kind of girl I really was, and I fancied somehow that you were going to be very stern and exacting, and—I—I wanted the upper ground to begin with, just to save trouble, Miss Casey."

Her eyes sparkled merrily at her own sauciness; and when I laughed at her hurried explanation, she laughed too, and we *were* better friends already. We were laughing still when some one tapped at the door.

"Come in," I said; and Emma Eaves, slowly and stolidly, entered the room.

"What is it, Emma?" I asked.

"I want to know what I am to do here, Miss Bertha?" she asked; "am I to keep in my room, or go downstairs, or what? Oh! I shan't like this big house at all!"

"Is this your maid, Miss Casey?" asked Isabel.

"This is my maid for the present—she enters your aunt's service—she is a good girl."

"What is her name?"

"Emma."

"Emma," said Miss Mannington to her, "why don't you admire this big house?"

"It's very dull—outside it's so awful still—I

don't like it at all! Oh! I wish I had never come here!"

"The journey has unsettled you, Emma," said I; "you must not judge the new home yet awhile."

"Patience, Emma," said Miss Mannington, "and then the place will be like heaven to you. It only requires time—a generation or so," she added, in a lower voice, "and then you'll be as happy as I am here. You've been used to the bustle of a city?"

"Yes."

"So have I," she added, "and this is a change to town-life, Emma. But as for it being dull—why, that's fancy! How old are you?"

"Going on for fifteen."

"You shall be my maid, Emma—my kindred spirit, who objects to the Hall!" she cried; "I'll take you into my service—come to my room, and see if you can brush up this hair of mine a bit. On probation, black eyes—now then! *Allons.*"

Before I could urge a faint remonstrance she had risen, seized the arm of Emma, and marched her out of the room. Emma passively accompanied her, looking back with her for an instant as they passed on to the broad landing beyond.

Both looking back at the same moment, two dark-haired, impulsive, passionate girls enough, Isabel's words struck me very forcibly. They *were* kindred spirits, perhaps!

CHAPTER IV.

MY NEW WORLD.

MY boxes not having arrived, I had simply to wash, rearrange my travelling dress, and rest myself for awhile, until the dinner-bell rang. After Isabel Mannington had withdrawn, there was an opportunity for rest and thought —certainly the opportunity had not presented itself before. "Dressed for dinner," then, I opened my window, and sat down before it to enjoy the few quiet moments left me before I went down into my new world. A quiet new world enough outside, it seemed; surely there would come happiness to me here! I felt that I was not a discontented being, at least, and that I could bear a great deal before I turned against this place. I thought that I should understand them all in

time; Mrs. Kingsworth, her niece, her brother, all eccentric, satirical beings, who would presently understand *me*, and with whom I should get on. I had come hither making up my mind to be contented with my station, and the little contrarieties I had already met with confused me somewhat, but did not daunt my courage.

A fair prospect beyond my chamber window—looking across the park, which undulated right and left of the mansion, and stretched far away beyond my ken. The deer that had been scared by my approach had stolen back again, and were gathered into one flock under the great elm-trees, beneath which they were comfortably dozing. The shadows of the trees were long upon the grass now, and the noisy rooks were floating slowly homewards.

From my window I could see—my eyes being good—the winding of the carriage drive, through the plantation, till it met the country road, and the land-bailiff's cottage facing the great gate of the Hall, and looking quite a feature in the landscape. The sky was bright still, all around was fair, and worth observing; the peace of the

her fear me, once or twice; but she is wilful beyond her years, and I have no more patience to study such a child, than I have heart. *You* must take all this trouble."

"It will be my duty—I will do my best."

For an instant Isabel's head peered round the door.

"Oh! I beg pardon—I did not know that you were engaged."

"Isabel," called Mrs. Kingsworth.

But Isabel did not reply, and when Mrs. Kingsworth walked to the door, the landing-place was empty.

She did not return to me, but said,

"Shall we proceed to the dining-room at once?"

"If you please."

I followed her; at the foot of the stairs she waited for me, and we went down together. At the dining-room door she asked me if I had heard from my brother Kingsworth lately.

"No, madam."

"Enwrapped in cloud-land till the cheque is due," she said calmly; "such is human nature, and —human gratitude!"

The dinner-bell began to ring as she spoke.

"We are not much too soon," she said as we passed into the dining-room together.

Mr. Mannington, in a black dress-coat and white neckcloth, appeared almost at the same instant; in a little while the daughter followed, grave and silent again, as though something new had disturbed her. Had she objected to Mrs. Kingsworth's visit to my room, to the topic upon which she had suddenly intruded, and which had possibly engendered fresh suspicions of my purpose there? We were all assembled; there was no need to ring the second bell; in due course we were seated, a quiet party of four, with four stately menials flitting at the back. A formal dinner enough; even Mr. Mannington far from loquacious, attentive to his dinner, and yet not inattentive to passing things; his eyes shifting to right and left, from his daughter to me, from me to Mrs. Kingsworth, who sat very rigid and stony at the head of the table. He looked more frequently towards his daughter; asked one or two questions as to the way in which she had spent the day, when she expected Miss Castle, her governess, back, &c. Isabel answered

very briefly, and Mr. Mannington relinquished the attempt to distract her attention, and gave a little sigh over his fish.

"You are not well, Isabel?" Mrs. Kingsworth said at last.

"I am very well, aunt."

"Has anything disturbed your usual serenity of demeanour?"

"Oh! no," answered the niece, with an incipient toss of her head.

"I am glad of that," was the dry response.

"Bel allows very little to disturb her," said Mr. Mannington, darting in here; "her heart's too good, though I say it myself, before her face. Like her dear mother—oh! Charlotte, how I have often wished that you had known my poor wife!"

"So I have heard you say," was the unsympathetic answer.

"Ahem!—another biscuit, John," in a peremptory tone to the lacquey; "Miss Casey," to me, "I can strongly recommend you biscuit in lieu of bread with your dinner. Keeps one from becoming bloated. Bel," he added, suddenly taking advantage of Mrs. Kingsworth's momentary distraction

to lean across the table and address her in a stage-whisper, "talk to your aunt—do!"

"What am I to say to aunt, pa?" asked his daughter, in her loudest tones.

Mrs. Kingsworth looked up, Mr. Mannington looked down into his plate muttering,

"Bless my soul, how aggravating, to be sure!"

"I think I have said before, Walter," emphasized Mrs. Kingsworth, "that I object to any prompting of Miss Mannington. My niece is not compelled to imitate her father's easy flow of conversation, and I am sure it is not desired on my part."

After this, there was silence for the remainder of the dinner. My first meal at Wilthorpe Hall was not a pleasant one. I appeared to have dropped in like a ghost to the banquet, and marred the general festivity by my presence. First appearances were often deceptive, I had been assured in my copy-book days, and, therefore, I would not assert at once that this was an unhappy home, or likely to be an unlucky change for me. In good —or bad—time, I should be able to judge more accurately; meanwhile, I would rest content.

Mr. Mannington was very attentive to me at dessert, very anxious to recommend me claret in lieu of port or sherry—he had preferred all his life a genuine article to a "doctored" one—he fought very hard against the natural dulness of the atmosphere, but found no prompting in his sister and daughter's stolidity, and very little in my own natural reserve.

He led the conversation round to books by some ingenious and tortuous process, and then said suddenly,

"By the way, Bel, you never found that passage for me in Wordsworth?"

"No."

"You said it was Wordsworth, I said it was Thomson—you said I was in the wrong, if you remember?"

"So you were," was the blunt response; "I'll fetch the book at once."

Exit Isabel in a hurry; the door had scarcely closed upon her before Mr. Mannington rose, muttered something about the library books being difficult to find, and withdrew, leaving Mrs. Kingsworth and me together.

"Pretty acting," said Mrs. Kingsworth; "don't you think so?"

"I—I see no reason for acting, Mrs. Kingsworth."

"Ah! but I do."

She had withdrawn from her place at the head of the table, and had taken her seat in a capacious arm-chair near the fire-side.

"This is my favourite seat when company is not expected," she said; "I have no great love for the drawing-room, which faces the east, and strikes like an iceberg before the summer sets in, in real earnest. Shall we adjourn thither, or stay here?"

I could but say "stay here" after so positive a hint.

"Isabel is partial to the drawing-room—she is a clever pianiste, and likes to dream over the instrument till her blood curdles as well as her listeners'. Poor Bel will not play to-night, however—her foolish father will lecture her to death on this evening's demeanour."

"She is not always like this, then?"

"She is as variable as April," replied Mrs. Kingsworth. "A good girl, that requires tact,

patience, study, *love*, to make a woman of her. You will understand her, or I shall be grievously disappointed."

"I will do my best," I repeated, for the second time that day.

"Mr. Mannington has neither tact nor patience; he studies *the great question* in his way, but it's a bad way; and as for love—well, he may love her after a fashion, too, but I doubt it."

"Doubt his love for his daughter?" I exclaimed.

"I was speaking to myself," she said, a little peevishly; "do not catch me up so quickly, Miss Casey. He would have been very much shocked if he had heard my maundering just now; in his own opinion, he is a good and just man. But he has not the spirit of his daughter, or—his isolated sister!"

"Isolated?"

Mrs. Kingsworth's lips compressed for an instant, and her nose appeared to become more thin and sharp.

"That is an odd parrot-like habit of repeating my words in an interrogative sense, Miss Casey," she said; "I shall be glad when you have broken

yourself of it. I let nothing disturb me very much on principle, but there are little minor eccentricities in people's conduct that fidget me at times, despite my efforts to go on calmly to the end."

I did not reply. I submitted to the reproof, and looked with her at the fire.

"Isolated was not a hasty word," she said, replying to my echo after awhile. "I am a woman isolated here—resigned to my position, but still utterly alone. My brother pays me court for my money's sake—my niece pays me no court at all. You are paid for your attendance here—and those for whose services we bargain are not expected to be the best or truest friends."

"Not for the money's sake am I here, madam," I answered. "I had money enough, and to spare, before I left my City home."

"You did not come for my sake?"

"Yes. You were kind to my mother, you have been more than generous to my brother John; I am indebted to you—you pressed me to take my place here, and I came. For better, for worse, I am here for good!"

"Were there other reasons for your coming hither?"

"Yes," I answered, after a moment's hesitation.

"What were they?"

"You will pardon me, but you did not seem a happy woman—rather a woman—"

"Go on—I like frankness."

"Rather a woman," I repeated, "who was somewhat *proud* of her unhappiness, and fostered thoughts that did her harm, and might be dissipated, to her great advantage."

"Never!"

"A woman who had been so good and generous, it struck me, should have shown a happier, brighter look, and I thought that, in good time, the chance might come for me——"

"Enough," she said, hastily, "the chance can never come, and you are a dreamer, Bertha Casey. You are romantic and unreal—you have no knowledge of the world, or your own sex. Dissipate all these foolish idle thoughts away, and make a model woman of my niece. To attempt to study me is to insult me! I am too old for any new impression."

"You asked for my thoughts, Mrs. Kingsworth."

"Yes—I have brought it on myself," she answered. "We will change the subject, if you please. Had you been any one else—had I less faith in you, I should have turned against you for this frankness, and seen in it but dissimulation. Ring for more coals, Miss Casey—the nights are very chilly still."

After the bell had been rung, and the order attended to, Mrs. Kingsworth said to the servant as he was withdrawing—

"Where is Miss Mannington?"

"With her father, in the library, ma'am."

"Have Miss Casey's boxes come?"

"No, ma'am."

"Present my compliments to Miss Mannington, and inquire if we are to have the pleasure of her company this evening."

The servant retired, and Mrs. Kingsworth asked a few more questions of me concerning my boxes.

"Are you tired?"

"No, madam."

"I thought of sending a messenger down to Mr.

Stewart's house to inquire if the boxes had been left there—the carriers have a habit of evading the drive, and considering Mr. Stewart my lodge-keeper, rather than my land-bailiff."

Mrs. Kingsworth continued to look at the fire and evade my gaze, I thought. Mrs. Kingsworth was evidently suggesting the expediency of getting me out of the house for awhile, and the *ruse* was somewhat of the clumsiest. It struck me that Miss Mannington had a lecture in store for her, or that her aunt feared *my* first impression of her niece would be a bad one, if I saw more of her that evening. She had faith in first impressions, and built her story from them—did she judge me by herself?

I took Mrs. Kingsworth's hint for another reason. My head ached; I was anxious for fresh air; a walk down the drive in the moonlight would do me good, give me time for a few of those conflicting thoughts that were already besetting me.

"I should like the walk to Mr. Stewart's lodge, if you would excuse me, Mrs. Kingsworth."

"As you please. Take your maid with you—I object to women walking alone after nightfall."

I retired, found my way to my room, encountered Emma Eaves wandering disconsolately about the landing, suggested the idea of a walk down the drive, met with her ready consent, and left the Hall with her, closing the great door quietly behind us.

The fresh air *was* welcome after that hot dining-room—I was glad that I had escaped into it. Fair, picturesque, and impressive was the great building in the moonlight; looking at it, I could not imagine that anything but a quiet life was to be mine within its walls. Emma looked back with me.

"It's a large house, I shall like it," she said, to my surprise—"I shall like *her*."

"Miss Mannington?"

"Yes—she'll be as good and kind to me as you are."

"I am glad you think so."

We went on together down the winding walk, flecked by moonlight here and there; it was a night to raise the spirits, and win one's heart to country life. Yes, here in good time would come happiness to us both! We were both full of

thoughts of the life beyond, and not inclined to talk much. We went briskly and rapidly down the drive, reached the great swing gate, passed through, crossed the road to the cottage fronting us, through the window of which a bright light was issuing. I knocked at the door, which was opened immediately, and disclosed on opening a view of the front parlour—the builder having objected to halls and passages. The gentleman who had spoken to Mr. Mannington in the afternoon, held the door by the handle and looked inquiringly towards us. By the table, smoking a cigar, and looking towards us also, sat a very tall and handsome man.

"I have called to ask, sir, if any boxes have been left here by the carrier to-day?"

"Oh! yes, they've been in the way these three hours. Step in, please, and swear to their identity. This gentleman," seeing me glance towards his companion, "is my brother—Mr. Stewart."

CHAPTER V.

MR. STEWART.

A PAINTER might have sketched this scene with some effect—the light and shade without the land-bailiff's cottage—two dark female figures in the moonlight—the sturdy bailiff at the open door—the warm, neatly-furnished interior—the iron safe let in the wall—the handsome man at the fireside, turned half towards the chess-board over which he had been intently bending, until his brother's free-and-easy introduction of him.

Then Mr. Stewart rose and bowed towards us, and for the first time I felt somewhat nervous at my unceremonious intrusion upon the bachelor home of Richard Stewart.

"Step in a moment, ladies," said the proprietor,

"my brother is not used to open doors and keen rushes of night air."

"I—I need not detain you, Mr. Stewart," I stammered. "If the boxes have arrived, I will send for them presently."

"These are your boxes?"

I stepped into the parlour and looked at the boxes placed in a corner behind the door.

"Yes, they are mine."

"Mr. Stewart was out when they arrived, or I should not have so easily dropped into the trap. I thought they were yours, Mark," he said, turning to his brother.

"And yet we came hither together, and you insisted upon carrying my portmanteau—why, what have you been dreaming about to-day, Dick?"

"I had an idea that you intended a surprise—a long stay here."

"Was it likely?"

"Well, scarcely; but I have recommended it so many times, Mark—have told you so often what you are working yourself into."

"Ah! so you have!" replied the other.

During this cursory dialogue I had leisure to glance at Mr. Stewart—"long Mark Stewart," as he was called in these parts before he went fortune-hunting, I had been told. My first impression had been that he was a handsome man—my second that he was a bright-faced, keen-eyed man, rather than an Adonis of six feet one. His was a striking face, rather than a handsome one; men with features more truly classical would have escaped less notice than this gentleman. It was a very *intent* face, if I may use that expression; full of eager thought, stamped with a far-away look at the chances by which he might profit, lit up by large brown eyes, and dignified and rendered manly by a broad, massive forehead, which seemed to account for that rise in life of which I had already heard.

He looked very much out of place in that humble cottage—one could scarcely associate him with the "surroundings." His brother wore still the velveteen coat that I had noticed in the the afternoon; Mr. Stewart was in morning dress, even fashionable morning dress, and there was a large diamond pin flashing from his silken

neckerchief. When he rose at my entrance he flung the cigar into the fire, as though he respected female antipathy to tobacco smoke.

"We were not prepared for ladies' society to-night," he said. "You will excuse the Havannah-like atmosphere of the room, I hope?"

I bowed assent, glanced at my boxes again, and then prepared to beat a hasty retreat. Emma Eaves, still more shy, had backed against the door, which she held ajar ready for precipitate flight the instant a word was addressed to her.

Richard Stewart stood with his hands in the pockets of his shooting-jacket, and a cigar still in his mouth, surveying the boxes with somewhat of a contemptuous expression.

"May I inquire, Miss—Miss Casey," he said, stooping a little to read my name upon the address card I had securely fastened there, "how you expect these boxes to reach the Hall to-night?"

"Mrs. Kingsworth will send down some of the servants."

"Which servants?"

"Really I—I don't know."

"No—I suppose not," he answered drily, "nor

anyone else across there," indicating the Hall by a nod of his head in that direction. "Of all the lazy, unmannerly, disobliging, self-sufficient, and ignorant jackanapes, commend me to Mrs. Kingsworth's staff. If I had my will," he cried impetuously, and with two round eyes half out of his head, "I'd tie the lot in a sack, and drop them over Entil Bridge."

"A harsh judgment, Dick," remarked his brother.

"I mean it," said the other emphatically. "I have told them of the pleasure it would give me, half a dozen times. I had rather bag them than a brace of pheasants, Mark."

"Do you really think that they will not attend to Mrs. Kingsworth's orders?" I asked.

"The'll say 'Yes, mum! certainly, mum!' and never move a step. Oh! I know my fine gentlemen by this time. And about ten or eleven o'clock you'll discover that the boxes have not been sent, and mention it to Mrs. Kingsworth, and she'll grow indignant and insist, and down will come the oppressed flunkies with a barrow, and then we shall be locked up for the night, and they may

knock till domesday before *I* pay any attention to them."

I rather objected to this brusque description, delivered with considerable animation and much fierceness of countenance, although the narrative appeared to amuse his younger brother, who leaned his back against the mantelpiece and laughed at the recital.

"What are *you* laughing at, stupid?" asked Richard Stewart, at last.

"At your virtuous indignation, Dick, and your graphic descriptions. I have always envied your powers of launching yourself into your subject."

"Thank you, young man, for the compliment," was the ironical rejoinder.

Meanwhile I surveyed my boxes, and reflected upon the best method of getting them home. Here were the boxes with my neat morning dresses, my fine things, my white things, and—not to be too squeamish about the matter—my night-things. One box, at least, I could not do without.

Mr. Richard Stewart appeared to divine my thoughts somewhat, and my guilty conscience brought the colour to my cheeks.

"One of these you'll want, of course, Miss Casey," he said; "here are three—which two can you do best without?"

"Those two. Emma, do you think——"

I turned to Emma, but she had edged her way through the door into the moonlight again. I was about to follow her, when Mr. Richard Stewart flung his cigar aside, seized the box unindicated, raised it from the ground, took his Scotch cap from his pocket with his disengaged hand, set it on his head, and marched out of the door.

"Oh! Mr. Stewart, I did not wish to put you to any trouble," I said, following him, and conscious of his brother following me, and closing the door behind him.

But Mr. Richard Stewart was already across the road, and opening the large swing-gate. Emma came to me, put her arm through mine, and regulated her course by mine. Mr. Mark Stewart, gentleman, followed his brother, and was evidently not *too much* of a gentleman to offer to assist him in the menial office. There was a small altercation on the instant, Richard Stewart shifting the box

from hand to hand, and dodging his brother—finally coming to a full stop in the carriage-drive, and sitting upon the box statuesque and obstinate.

"No, Mark—none of that," he was saying as we came up with them. "What I choose to do is my own business—what you choose to do is other people's. If it were heavy I would ask you to be officious and meddlesome—meanwhile leave the cord alone, or I'll fling the box at you!"

"Miss Casey," said Mark Stewart, appealing to me as I came up with them, "is not this too heavy a box for one to carry?"

"I think——"

"It does not matter what anybody thinks," was the short answer, "if anybody wishes to interfere with me and my method of management, I shall take the liberty of going back with the box and locking it up for the night."

"But——" I began again, when Mr. Mark Stewart interrupted me this time.

"Miss Casey, if you had only known my brother Richard two hours, you would have understood that he is very proud of his will—and extremely fond of his own unpleasant way. If he prefer all

the weight, he must have it. Argument with Richard Stewart is like argument with that elm-tree. I resign."

"Then keep your distance, old fellow."

Richard Stewart lifted the box and marched on again; his brother Mark walked by my side a few paces in the rear. Chance, on the first day of my appearance at Wilthorpe, had brought me more companions than I had bargained for.

"You are new to Wilthorpe, Miss Casey?" Mr. Stewart asked.

"I came hither for the first time to-day."

"You will like the place. It is a pretty spot for—inaction. A man having made his fortune in a more stirring scene, might come back here to spend his latter days, and love it very dearly. I often fancy that I shall settle down here in my old age—Dick and I together. We were born here, and grew up here together—it would be a fair ending to both lives."

"You are attached to Wilthorpe, then?"

"Very much attached," was the answer. "When I am hard at work in the North I bring the machinery of my schemes to a standstill for a while,

and think of Wilthorpe, and of my honest, unambitious brother. If he had left with me in the old days he would have been a richer man, but he held his ground against all inducements, as you have just seen him holding to your box, Miss Casey. In all the world no better a fellow than Dick Stewart, or one more worthy of the world's respect."

I thought of Mr. Mannington's remarks on Richard Stewart, and endeavoured to reconcile the two verdicts which had been uttered that day.

"But I weary you, as well I may, singing to the praise and glory of my family. If you ever draw my brother into conversation you will find that he will make the *amende honorable* by singing to my praise and glory also—with less justice though," he added, in a strange voice that startled me by its pathetic intonation.

"Your brother is content with Wilthorpe, then?" I said after a moment's pause.

"Yes—he has the advantage of me—he is a contented man! Mrs. Kingsworth and he agree very well together; and there is little to disturb

him, save a foolish idea that I am working too hard in Edinburgh, wasting my brains in gigantic efforts to increase my worldly substance. How is Mrs. Kingsworth, may I ask?" he said, suddenly changing the topic.

"Very well."

"She is always well. A hale, strongminded, gentlewoman, for whom I have a great respect—and, if my eyes have not deceived me, here she comes!"

"Mrs. Kingsworth!"

"Oh! yes. This is a favourite walk of hers when the weather permits—at least it was in my time. Mrs. Kingsworth is not afraid of ghosts—are you, Miss Casey?"

"Not very much afraid, sir."

Mrs. Kingsworth, the rigid outline of whose figure I recognized at last, had come up with Richard Stewart, and was speaking to him as we advanced.

"You were always inclined to be eccentric, Mr. Stewart," we heard her say in that cool, disparaging tone that I already knew so well; "and this playing the part of porter and rendering yourself

a laughing-stock to my servants, is scarcely to my taste."

"I am sorry for that, but Miss Casey wanted her box, and there's not a stick in your establishment who would not have made as much noise about fetching it, as fetching the steeple off Wilthorpe Church. And if anybody laugh at me, Mrs. Kingsworth, it must be, I take it, at a *very* respectful distance."

"Who is this, Stewart?" she said sharply.

"My brother Mark, Mrs. Kingsworth. I brought him back from Edinburgh with me this morning."

"You did not tell Mr. Mannington so."

"No—I thought the news would reach him in good time."

We were altogether in the avenue now; Mr. Mark Stewart raised his hat to Mrs. Kingsworth, who inclined her head stiffly in return. We were all in the shade just here, and could not well see each other's faces.

"Back again at Wilthorpe, Mr. Stewart," Mrs. Kingsworth said; "there have been great changes since you quitted it."

"Yes, madam."

"Great changes in you, who have risen to wealth and fame—or report belies you."

"To a little wealth, perhaps—thanks to a few lucky speculations—to no fame that I am aware of."

"How is that?"

"Business men—commercial men—stand but little chance of fame."

"They are content with lucky bargains rather than with laurels, and so are wise men," was the answer. "Fame after all is for a few fools who seek out-of-the-way means of living and starving. My husband knew this in his day—so do you, Mr. Stewart."

"I like commerce, madam," was the reply.

"It suits you," she answered. "You were a man determined to rise in the world, and you succeeded. Well, this is the first opportunity of offering you my congratulations, sir."

They were very cold ones, and he felt them to be so, for he answered as coldly and more proudly than herself:

"Thank you."

"The old house where your father died must

appear a very poor and wretched domicile to sojourn at in these days."

"If I thought so, madam, I would kick him out," cried Richard Stewart.

"He must feel ashamed of the old home—the evidence of the past origin, I think. Men who have risen possess this weakness—which is natural enough, and, therefore, not be complained of."

"Ask him," said Richard Stewart.

"I have heard the remarks—let me reply to them," said Mr. Stewart, quickly. "I have come back here full of love for the old home—for the brother who makes it home still. When I left Edinburgh, I left my pride behind me, as a useless incumbrance, scarcely worth bringing to Wilthorpe."

"And you tell me that you can settle down calmly and quietly in your brother's cottage?"

"Certainly."

"I have heard that you keep your carriage in Edinburgh—is that true?"

"That is true, certainly."

"You are a lucky man, considering your youth. Your life must be worth reading."

"It is not published yet?" he said, more lightly.

"Oh! the true life, I mean—the life that no one writes in these days. Mr. Stewart," turning to the elder brother, "be kind enough to leave the box there—it shall be sent for at once."

"Here?"

"If you please. Your brother," turning to Mr. Mark Stewart again, "is a prouder man than you are—his is a pride that apes humility, and always vexes me by its demonstrativeness."

"Confound it!" blurted forth Richard Stewart, "if that's not a cool affront, Mrs. Kingsworth, I never heard one! And before Mark too——"

"Who knows better than to take Mrs. Kingsworth's pleasant irony for sober fact!" said his brother.

"Meaning that I have been uttering falsehoods for the last few minutes," said Mrs. Kingsworth, quickly. "Good night, Mr. Stewart."

She turned her back upon him, and retraced her steps along the gravelled carriage-way. I bade the brothers Stewart good night also, and followed Mrs. Kingsworth, Emma Eaves still holding by my arm. Richard Stewart sat on my box, and whistled

plaintively; Mark Stewart, after raising his hat to me, said a few words to his brother, which elicited a growling response, despite the laugh by which those words had been accompanied.

Mrs. Kingsworth took my arm when I came up with her, and three abreast, we walked towards the Hall. She was silent for some time, but I fancied that her stick rang somewhat impatiently upon the ground as we proceeded.

"How long does that plebeian stay here, Miss Casey?" she said, suddenly.

"I do not know," I replied—"you allude to Mr. Stewart, I presume?"

"There is no other plebeian here—his brother is a gentleman by comparison."

"Indeed!"

"I object to these self-made men," said this uncharitable lady; "they annoy me—they thrust their greatness into the face of society, as a man would thrust his clenched fist into the face of a foe. This Mr. Mark Stewart will be an eyesore to me until he goes away again. We never agreed together—we never shall!"

Out of the avenue, and following the road to the

flight of steps leading to the grand entrance. On the top step, a distinguishing feature in the moonlight, was the box I had seen a few minutes since, half-way down the drive.

"That man's slipped through the trees on our left, and got before us. I—I really think I hate him worse than his brother," affirmed Mrs. Kingsworth, with a dash of her walking-stick on the steps, that told of her equanimity being a trifle disturbed, just for once in a way.

CHAPTER VI.

"INVITED OUT."

I THOUGHT that I should settle down to work next day, but I found it very difficult to determine my style of "work," or to discover in which direction it lay. I found myself companion to a young lady who objected still to my companionship, who looked upon me with suspicion, and, despite my former explanation with her, possibly still considered me a spy. Hers was a quick, impulsive nature, I had already discovered; I did not despair of making an impression upon her, and of winning her in due course to my side. Still proud of "my way," and consoling myself with egotistical ideas, the reader may perceive.

Well, even in those early days I did not wholly fail; my self-sufficiency did not lead me much

astray. I proved myself no spy; I forced not myself upon Isabel at all times and seasons; I watched her variable moods and did my best to make a friend of her; by degrees her suspicions wore off, and she began to seek me out in the fitful moments of her better nature.

I became interested in her—strangely and deeply interested—therefore, I worked with my whole heart to gain an influence over her. She had been a spoiled child; an easy, worldly mother as I learned afterwards, had given her her own way, lavished upon her an intense but jealous affection, allowed no interference with her; her father was a man who disliked trouble, exercise of paternal authority, anything that affected his nerves, and after her mother's death Isabel continued to grow up capricious and self-willed. Thus a naturally affectionate disposition, allied to a warm heart, had become warped and distorted, and her sudden induction to the Wilthorpe establishment, and to the Wilthorpe rules which regulated it, had depressed her spirits somewhat, but not bent her to the rule and form of its austere society. One thing Isabel Manning-

ton had not bargained for; she had entered her new estate with a secret resolve to resist; she had met there a stern impassive woman, who was vain of her immobility and who exercised an iron rule, but she let her almost take the place of the mother whom she had lost. She turned, as if by instinct, to her aunt; the cold demeanour and the unsympathetic nature of Mrs. Kingsworth were restraints to her affection, but they did not turn it aside or stop its growth.

She succumbed to Mrs. Kingsworth more than to any one on earth: only her aunt had power to influence those wild moods to which she was subject; —influence them, be it understood, rather than subdue them; for Mrs. Kingsworth possessed only the power to render her sorry afterwards. Isabel Mannington respected power, loved her aunt, and hated Wilthorpe, then. I was not long in discovering this, or in detecting that beneath the impassiveness of my employer there was a deep love for the girl whose youth had brightened her home. Mrs. Kingsworth would not have acknowledged this; would have even resented the imputation as unworthy of her stoicism, but I thought that I saw it

in the early days, despite her admirable acting, and I was sure of it long afterwards.

Her first conversation with me concerning Isabel, two days after my appearance at the Hall, suggested the suspicion.

"How do you like my niece now?" she asked.

"I have seen but little of her yet, Mrs. Kingsworth."

"She is distrustful of you—it will wear off. Hers is not an ungenerous mind."

"No—I think not."

"I am sure not," she added; "you will like this girl—you will gain an ascendancy over her, for the reason that yours is an equable mind and hers is changeable. Subdue her passionate temperament, reason with or satirize her out of her sullen fits, turn that capriciousness a little aside, and she will become a perfect woman. I should like her a prouder girl—a proud woman is always safe."

"Pride goeth before a fall, madam."

"Not the pride that I mean, and that you do not seem to understand, or will not understand, Miss Casey, I cannot say which."

And after this rebuke Mrs. Kingsworth left me, and I went in search of my *ward.*

With my ward I made progress even in the few days before Sunday came round. Miss Castle, the finishing governess, arrived during the week—a short, sharp-nosed lady of fifty, to whom Isabel had long had an insuperable objection, and whose place with a pupil, the reverse of tractable, was far from a sinecure. Isabel Mannington flew to me in preference to Miss Castle, after school hours; by degrees this wayward girl won upon my heart, by degrees I was beginning to understand her.

On the Saturday evening she surprised me by saying that she thought of taking Emma Eaves for her maid—she required a maid, and would teach Emma all that was necessary herself. I was sorry for her preference; I had other thoughts for Emma, and I felt that the girl entrusted to my charge by John, would not improve under a mistress so young, and whose moods were rather more variable than her own. Probably I gently hinted this, and more firmly fixed Isabel to her intentions.

"I have taken a fancy to Emma, and that's enough, Miss Casey," she said; "my last maid was an old fright and a fidget, and I like younger people and younger faces about me. When I am a woman, I'll not have an old face about my house."

"Not one?" I asked.

"Oh! my aunt will keep to Wilthorpe all her days, and when I am blessed with wings to fly, you shall be a witness to the graceful manner in which I will spread them and soar away from her."

"When you are older in years, you will have less impulsive thoughts—be more inclined to settle down."

"Ah! you know nothing about it. I shall be very glad when I have a will of my own."

She spoke as though her will had been thwarted all her life, rather than the reverse. At dinner that day she communicated her intention of taking Emma for her maid, and looked from her aunt to her father for the opposition which she expected, and was ready to encounter. Mr. Mannington said nothing until his sister carelessly and coldly replied—

"Very well," when he said "Very well" also, and appeared relieved at the general equanimity remaining undisturbed. He was in the best of tempers that evening himself: not too loquacious, which was never his weakness when Mrs. Kingsworth was at the head of the table.

Next day we went to Wilthorpe Church—a stone building of no particular order of architecture, which, surrounded by a wooden steeple, formed one of the ugliest edifices in or out of England. The interior was an improvement on the exterior—it was well-proportioned and well-fitted. There was that quietness about the place which more often pervades a country church than a town one; no bustle, no confusion, no people arriving late and looking vacantly about them; no loungers dropping in out of the rain, or people in search of excitement coming to hear the last sensation preacher. All Wilthorpe that desired to attend divine service that morning, was present before the clergyman's arrival—only the clergyman, who took things easily in this part of the world, was a quarter of an hour behind time.

Our pew was the state pew of the church—titled people had held possession of the Hall before Mrs. Kingsworth's day, and the comfort which they had studied Mrs. Kingsworth had kept up. It was the oddest pew into which I had ever been shown, and I had some difficulty in suppressing a smile at the ease and elegance thereof—it was a room rather than a pew, a high-panelled exclusive compartment, concealing us in our seats from vulgar gaze. It stood apart from the rest of the pews, at the side of the church and up three steps. It was handsomely carpeted, full of velvet cushions, and it possessed a stove, in which a fire was burning that bright May morning, and which fire Mr. Mannington immediately began to poke and stir, until Mrs. Kingsworth rapped him on the elbow with her stick. The stove, with its chimney built in the wall, and passing out of the roof, was a novelty to me, and very unpewlike an appearance it presented. It was the fashion in those parts, I found out afterwards—my readers taking the tour of the churches within twenty miles of Peterborough may meet with one or two of these snug

constructions, in which the comfort of lordly pew-renters is studied to advantage.

We were five in number: Mr. Mannington and daughter, Mrs. Kingsworth, Miss Castle and I. We sat about the pew as we might have sat about the drawing-room at the Hall, and the minister looked straight at us from his pulpit, and favoured us with more than a fair share of his attention, —because we were great folk, and had dinner-parties occasionally, Mrs. Kingsworth asserted the next day.

I had already given Mr. Mannington the credit of being a gentleman anxious to know and see everything—that was his reigning weakness, which he even carried to church with him. When we stood up in our places, he kicked a stool to the front, skipped upon it, and looked round the church; never was a man less imbued with the right spirit of devotion.

"Charlotte," he said to his sister, in no very subdued tones, "he's sitting in the free seats!"

"I see him," was the sepulchral response.

"Very remarkable—there's plenty of room in

the Cumberfields' pew, and in his own brother's for that matter. What an odd man!"

"All his pride—his ridiculous and demonstrative pride."

Miss Castle, who was of a pious turn of mind, elevated the whites of her eyes and sighed at this profanity, but no one studied Miss Castle at the Hall. They paid her salary regularly; they expected her to do her best for the money, and they kept her in her place. If I were inclined to be shocked at the irreverence of my patroness and her brother, I restrained my feelings, and endeavoured to shut out their stage whispering.

It was a failure, partly for the reason that Isabel, perched also on a stool by her father's side, suddenly leaned forward and asked me to whom her father was alluding—partly from my own instinctive glance towards the free-seats, which I could just see then, and where, amidst a crowd of country nondescripts, sat Mr. Stewart, the merchant from Edinburgh, the gentleman who had walked part of the way back towards the Hall with me the night of my arrival at Wilthorpe.

He looked towards the pew where we were

standing, and did not appear abashed in any degree by the evident attention directed towards him from our quarter of the church—he was in an irreverent mood himself, for I could see the corners of his mouth twitching with an evident desire to smile at our curiosity. I turned away my head, and did not look in his direction again; I felt that his intent stare towards our pew had made me change colour, despite my efforts to the contrary. Mrs. Kingsworth was right, I thought—I could not help thinking it was the demonstrative pride of long Mark Stewart that had led him to take his place amongst the farm labourers in their Sunday smocks, and to show himself above appearances. His brother, looking more fierce than ever in his black clothes, had a pew all to himself a few paces from him on the right, and yet Mr. Mark preferred, for the sake of effect, perhaps, to keep his place there, and frown down the pew-opener, who persisted in offering him all kinds of seats in all kinds of places.

I did my best to forget him; I should have succeeded, I hope, had it not been for Mr. Mannington's watch upon him, even his stealthy approach

to the side of the pew during the reading of the Litany, and his clambering on to his perch to look after Mr. Stewart again. Mr. Stewart met his glance with interest it seemed, for Mr. Mannington stepped back suddenly, slipped off the stool, brought his chin in contact with the top of the pew and his teeth together, with a formidable clash.

"It's a pity that you do not know how to behave yourself, Mr. Mannington," his sister said at this juncture; and Mr. Mannington did his best to behave himself for the remainder of the service, after carefully feeling each tooth in his head, and making sure that no displacement had occurred from the shock.

I fancied that Mrs. Kingsworth made an effort to reach the churchyard before the Stewarts, she was so eager to quit the church that day; but when we were walking down the broad country road towards the Hall, the brothers were ahead of us, and before we were at the Hall gates they had closed the door of their small cottage and shut our greatness from their sight.

On the Monday, Mrs. Kingsworth surprised me.

"You must see the *élite* of Wilthorpe society, Miss Casey—you are one of the family, and under my protection. I am going to take you out to dinner this evening."

"But I have received no invitation."

"That makes no difference, Miss Casey. My friends, under any circumstances, are always glad to see me, I find."

I was very nervous—the invitation to my first dinner-party—and such an invitation as it was!—had come with a shock upon me, from which I could not instantly recover.

"Be ready at six, please—evening dress."

"Oh! I—I would so much rather be excused, Mrs. Kingsworth."

"I have written to inform my friends that I shall take the liberty of bringing a certain Miss Casey with me—so they will not be wholly unprepared for your appearance. Besides, I wish you to be seen, and to see—to know all the stars in the Wilthorpe firmament, and learn not to be dazzled by their effulgency. They are a commonplace, scandalous, hideous tribe of people about here, but it is necessary to accept their invitations.

My niece will have to accept them in a year or two's time. When that time comes, you will take my place by her side, and I will go back within myself."

"For what reason, madam?" I asked.

"Because it suits me," she said sharply.

It suited her to take me into society also, and I consented. I had no valid excuse ready at the instant, and I could see that it was Mrs. Kingsworth's wish. Why should I thwart it? She was a woman of few wishes, and had been kind to me after her own eccentric fashion.

But I was very nervous, notwithstanding. My gay life was to begin in this place, against the quietness of which Bel Mannington had remonstrated. I was to enter society here, and make my world from its component atoms. I should get used to society in time, and be able to hold my ground there, I thought, when invitations came less suddenly and less at second hand. I did not even know whither I was going, or whom I was to meet —it was all on a par with Mrs. Kingsworth's secretive disposition.

My experience of dinner-parties was confined to

the Corkcutters' stately banquets—twice or thrice a year—when the kitchen was given up to an army of cooks, and the hall and staircase to an army of waiters, and I was shut in my room till the City folk had dined and gone away again. But this was to be a dinner-party whereat I was to play a principal part as guest, and the doubtful part of a guest who had not been specially invited also. I was to meet company—real gentlefolk; and the thought of real gentlefolk was embarrassing to one who had but seen them at a distance, and stood, as was natural enough, rather in awe of them. It was not long before I discovered that they were very much like other people who were not real gentlefolk, and that they had less high notions, take them altogether.

In my new silk, which I had purchased for evening wear at Wilthorpe before leaving London for good—was it "for good," I wondered very often?—I went down at six in the evening, and found Mrs. Kingsworth and Mr. Mannington awaiting my arrival.

"Punctual to a minute," said Mr. Mannington,

looking at his watch. "Miss Casey, I am charmed at your precision."

"Never mind what your softness is charmed with, Walter," said his sister, "stand on one side, and let me see if Miss Casey will do."

"Why, of course she will," he said.

Mrs. Kingsworth took me in from head to foot, and nodded her head towards me without a comment upon my personal appearance—and it had struck me that I was almost looking pretty that evening! I had passed muster, however; there was nothing to be said against me, and we proceeded down the entrance steps to the carriage waiting for us.

The coachman had had his directions previously, and I was balked in my desire for information. Balked for a short while, however, for before we had reached the main road I said:

"Where are we going, Mrs. Kingsworth, may I ask?"

She did not reply; she might have been enjoying my perplexity even, for she knitted her thick grey eyebrows at her brother, who answered for her at once:

"Don't you know? Why, Sir Benjamin Prout's, to be sure. His son comes of age to-day, and we consider that it will be a very grand affair indeed. Why he didn't give a ball, I can't make out—I like balls better than dinner-parties myself."

"Gay young fellows invariably do," was the bitter answer of his sister, looking the true gentlewoman that night in her black velvet dress—half-low dress, with lace across her shoulders, as befitted her age, although some people will display their bones to the last, no matter how terribly they rattle!

A grand affair—a large dinner-party—a baronet's son coming of age!—oh! dear, I thought, if any City people were at Wilthorpe for change of air, and should recognize the poor little housekeeper of the Corkcutters' Hall! How I wished myself at the Corkcutters' Hall then—how the terrible nature of my ordeal struck me in all its intensity for the first time.

"Don't be frightened, Miss Casey," said Mrs. Kingsworth, "no one will attempt to eat you, take my word for it."

Out of the one great gate which the hall possessed, and into the road, nearly running down

Mr. Richard Stewart, who was coming in the reverse direction on horseback.

Mrs. Kingsworth pulled the check string, and then began hammering the glass with the handle of her stick to attract Mr. Stewart's attention. A sudden idea had evidently seized her.

Mr. Richard Stewart reined in his cob; Mrs. Kingsworth lowered the carriage window.

"I wanted to speak to you about selling that timber to the Manchester man. I have altered my mind, and he can go somewhere else."

"I'll tell him so, madam," he replied.

"Do, please. How is your brother this evening?"

"Very well—thank God."

"At home?"

"No, madam. Gone out to dinner, like a gentleman."

I fancied that Mrs. Kingsworth took a longer breath than usual, but it might have been fancy after all.

"To Sir Benjamin's, I presume?"

"Yes. Sir Benjamin and he are old friends, Mrs. Kingsworth. Sir Benjamin is always glad

to see my brother Mark," the land-bailiff added quite proudly, but in his usual jerking way.

"Ah! well he may be."

Mrs. Kingsworth drew up the window, and away we went once more, leaving Mr. Richard Stewart staring fiercely after us.

"I thought as much!" said Mrs. Kingsworth, and was silent for the remainder of the journey.

CHAPTER VII.

A DINNER AT SIR BENJAMIN'S.

I SHOULD scarcely have ventured to take up my reader's time with a description of a dinner-party given by people who have no connection with this story, had it not been for the link which connects that party with a strange chain of subsequent events.

A new phase in Bertie Casey's history begins from this date; life of a new pattern, crossed and intermingled with threads of divers colours was commenced here, and if the story be worth the reading at all, this common-place matter of a dinner-party is at least worth recording.

Am I out of rule in calling a dinner-party at a real baronet's "commonplace"—a baronet of stand-

ing in the county, whose dinners and wines were excellent, and whose company was equally choice? Commonplace only in print—be it fairly understood.

It was a large dinner-party for country-folk. There were five or six-and-twenty people in the drawing-room when we arrived; the ladies sitting together on couches and chairs, talking of their "ailments and children;" the gentlemen standing in argumentative groups, deep in politics and parish matters.

Sir Benjamin, a fine old gentleman, tall and white-haired, received us at the door of the drawing-room; his son, Mr. Benjamin, a slim young gentlemen, tall and carroty, followed suit, bade us welcome, received the congratulations of Mrs. Kingsworth and Mr. Mannington upon reaching man's estate, bowed low at the same time as his parent, when Mrs. Kingsworth introduced me as her friend, expressed his pleasure at making my acquaintance, and formally introduced me—he was a very attentive young man—to every person in the room.

Thus I formed a passing acquaintance with the

gentility of the country, and recognized three faces amongst the party—the clergyman of Wilthorpe Church who had preached last Sunday's sermon, the curate who had assisted him in the Sunday's service, and was a very meek-looking young man with pink eyes like a rabbit, and Mr. Mark Stewart, to whom I had already been introduced in a manner less rigidly correct.

Mr. Stewart held out his hand to me in lieu of the usual profound bow, and said, laughing at the same time:

"I have already the pleasure of Miss Casey's acquaintance."

We shook hands, whilst Mr. Benjamin, taken by surprise, said:

"Oh! I beg pardon. I did not know that."

"Quite old friends, Prout," said he.

"Then I leave Miss Casey in good hands," and Mr. Benjamin darted away to do the honours to the next arrival sailing in at that juncture through the door in blue brocade and cabbage roses, and having a little man with a hump-back in tow.

I was glad that I did not feel quite alone in the crowd—glad to meet again this singular man, who

played two such opposite parts in the county, and aggravated Mrs. Kingsworth.

"I hope that you are not very impatient for your dinner, Miss Casey?" asked Mr. Stewart.

"Oh! no."

"Country dinner-parties are always behind time—the guests come from long distances, their horses are not in good training, and ten to one if the cooks of the present establishment have not miscalculated the soup, or forgotten the thickening."

I objected to this half-sarcastic vein; I had quite enough of this at all times and seasons at home. I changed the topic of conversation.

"You know Sir Benjamin Prout, Mr. Stewart?"

It was an unnecessary question, but the only one that suggested itself on the instant.

"Sir Ben and I are old friends—he was my first patron, Miss Casey."

"Indeed."

"And a man who did not disgust me with his patronage, but sunk the patron for the friend when I rose from the first step on which he had placed me, to the second, third, and fourth. His cousin's

firm in Edinburgh received me as clerk, constituted me as partner on my twenty-first birthday—when his cousin died, I was left sole principal. So I am indebted to Sir Benjamin, and therefore could not gracefully refuse his invitation to dinner."

"You wished to refuse, then?"

"I have no very great love for his set," was the evasive answer. "His friends are not mine, and do not belong to my world. I have come hither for change of air and scene, to keep my brother company, and *do the humble*—I have enough of *this* at home."

Yes, he was a proud man. Mrs. Kingsworth was right, or he would have never given emphasis to those words which I have italicized above. I scarcely knew whether he would improve upon acquaintance or not; I doubted if I should be able to judge, he being a fugitive character, whose days were not likely to be long in the land of Wilthorpe.

Sir Benjamin Prout advanced towards us.

"Sorry to interrupt this animated *tête-à-tête*, Stewart," he said drawing him a little aside, "but——"

The lower tone in which Sir Benjamin spoke

was lost upon me, but Mr. Stewart's response was not, much to my amazement.

"The devil!" he exclaimed, in a subdued voice—or in a voice not sufficiently subdued for ears polite.

"Why, you don't object——"

"But I do very much, by your good leave, old friend," he said. "She don't like me. Can't you manage to pair me off with——"

I moved farther away at the same moment as he sunk his voice still lower. Dear me! with whom did he wish to be paired off, I wondered. His request was not complied with, however, for Sir Benjamin began shaking his head, and spreading out both his hands in a deprecatory manner.

Sir Benjamin, it was evident, was anxious to leave Mr. Stewart and afford each gentleman a hint as to the lady whom he was to escort to the dining-room, but Mr. Stewart would not let him go; he held him by the button-hole, expostulating, reasoning, and laughing, until Sir Benjamin laughed too, and scratched his head with his white gloved hands in his hilarity.

"You must take Miss O'Brien, then," he said, and darted away before any further expostulation

—if any were intended—could be urged on Mr. Stewart's part. All this was done very quietly, unperceived by the guests conversing in their several groups. A few minutes afterwards dinner was announced, and the curate of Wilthorpe, blushing to the roots of his hair, and far more embarrassed than I was, advanced towards me, and offered me his arm.

Then, in most imposing marching order, we filed into the dining-room, and began the sober business of the evening. When we were settled down to the dining-table, bright and gay with its hot-house flowers, its epergnes and glass, I looked round for my home-faces. Mrs. Kingsworth was a long way from me in the distance, Mr. Manningtón sat opposite, and commenced nodding and smirking across at me directly I met his eye. On my right sat Mr. Crease, the curate, on my left Mr. Stewart.

All a very brilliant scene in my new world, that I look back at with some pleasure still. New life for me; good society; a scene that I thought worth studying when my heart had left off fluttering, and I had become acclimatized. It was my first

entrance into society, and I was young enough to take a pleasure in it.

A grand dinner, that took three hours to get through; Mr. Crease talkative after awhile, when he had overcome his first degree of nervousness, full of village matters, district visiting, the people who came regularly to church and grew no better, the people who stayed away from church and grew much worse, those who were grateful for little favours, and those who received large ones and grumbled at the donors; the refractory nature of the Sunday-school children, and the ambition of the organist, who was always attempting to start a choir and failing miserably; the style of preaching in vogue at the church from which he had come, and the particular style which he should like at Wilthorpe, if the rector would only let him have his own way. He was full of his profession; he was evidently a very amiable and earnest young man, whose heart was in his work—if all parsons and curates took after him, what a good world this might be made! I knew that he was an amiable man, for he at last changed the subject of discourse to his family, far away in Devonshire—a large family of seventeen,

of which he was the fourth in order of primogeniture. He gave me the history of all his brothers and sisters—especially of little Tom, the boldest young scamp in Devonshire, he said chuckling audibly—and he spoke reverently and tenderly of his mother, who was very old—too old almost for housekeeping.

Meanwhile the dinner went on—course followed course, pale sherry and still hock were replaced by the sparkling wines in fashion with the solids—the waiters flitted busily at the back, the guests thawed and became conversational, the curate was in full career, attentive, chatty and agreeable, when Mr. Stewart touched my arm.

"This is the second time I have ventured to break the spell, Miss Casey," he said quite gravely; "the first was a terrible failure."

"I am very sorry that you should have taken all this trouble, Mr. Stewart."

"Pray don't mention it," he said lightly; "I am seeking the favour of taking wine with you."

"With pleasure."

"Out of fashion some people say—out of rule, at a time like the present, others would observe—

and the fashion prevails still, because it is a hearty and good one. Mr. Crease, may I beg the favour of your filling Miss Casey's glass?"

"I—I beg pardon—certainly, Mr. Stewart."

I took wine with Mr. Stewart, who bowed and looked rather oddly and even comically at me out of his brown eyes. He continued to discourse after an interchange of compliments, and left the curate silent and ostensibly absorbed in his dinner for the next ten minutes; Miss O'Brien, a thin lady of forty with a Roman nose, sat also apart, and rather inclined to resent the slight put upon her by making faces at me in a monomaniacal manner. Once the curate, with an impetuous dash, took up the topic of country-life upon which Mr. Stewart was discoursing and made some allusion to it also; and if ever a man were looked down for his intrusion, poor Mr. Crease was by the steady, stern gaze of the Edinburgh merchant. Mr. Crease's remark was "taken as read" in a very indifferent manner; and as I felt that the curate had not been treated well, I waited for the first full stop, and then addressed a few words to him, for which he was grateful, I think, all the rest of his life. Mr.

Crease was a humble man, a poor man, and the wealthy folk about him had somewhat oppressed him. The dinner to which he had been invited had probably cost more than his year's salary, and had affected him to a certain extent. Dinner was over at last, the dessert was on the table, and the speeches appropriate to the occasion set in, in due course. The health of the heir to the Prout estates, the young gentleman who had attained his majority that day, was proposed by a clumsy gentleman, overfull of his subject and neglectful of his host, drunk with the usual acclamations, and responded to hastily and nervously, with an extraordinary conglomeration of nominative cases excusable in a youth who had been learning his speech for three days, and then had utterly forgotten every word to it.

The response had not long been uttered, and the curate was again volubly discoursing on the topic of his Devonshire home, when two gentlemen suddenly rose to their feet, prompted by the same instinct to deliver an oration. Those gentlemen were the rector of Wilthorpe and Mr. Stewart.

The rector, the Reverend Mr. Gapwing, a stout

and important-looking gentleman—that impression, I regret to say, had even seized me at Wilthorpe Church last Sunday—looked blandly across at Mr. Stewart, anticipating that gentleman's subsidence into the seat he had recently vacated; but Mr. Stewart maintained his ground, and took a critical survey of the guests at the table. Mr. Gapwing coughed—Miss O'Brien gently whispered to her companion that the rector evidently wished to speak; Mr. Stewart bowed his head to the lady, and then suddenly focussed Mr. Gapwing, who turned very red in the face, and sank slowly into his chair. The gentleman from Edinburgh had never intended to withdraw.

In this case I was certainly glad, for Mr. Stewart had puzzled me very much, and every opportunity of judging him, and seeing his true colours, I did not like to lose. He was certainly a singular man; singular in his address, appearance, and firmness, and I could but admire his self-command—he, the man who had risen from nothing, in the presence of the well-born. He felt himself an equal there—and certainly there was no guest who looked his equal, judging by appearances.

I need not trouble my readers by the words which he addressed to the company; I have no distinct recollection of every turn of speech. It was a clever oration enough, delivered with easy grace, good taste, and eloquence. Every word was well chosen, and deliberately uttered; precise, sound and clear, an epitome, as it were, of the speaker's character. His pride—if it were his pride, as Mrs. Kingsworth asserted—peered out, I thought; he was proposing the health of the host, who should have been taken first in order, he considered, despite the motive which had brought them together that day, and he alluded to his wish to propose the health of his friend, Sir Benjamin, for the reason that he considered no one present had a greater claim to take his place, more thoroughly appreciated the sterling merit of the host, or had so much cause to feel grateful for his friendship. He gave way to no one in his esteem for Sir Benjamin—he never gave way, he added, glancing at Mr. Gapwing, who was still far from his natural colour. He spoke of the host as the gentleman, the scholar, the friend, the father, and patron—how much was real, or how much the varnish of fine words incidental to health-

drinking, I could not tell; but he spoke earnestly and well, and he carried his listeners along with him. Even the curate, whom he had snubbed, leaned forward with his hands clasped upon the table, listened intently to every word, and joined heartily in the applause which followed Mr. Stewart's remarks.

Mr. Stewart sat down amidst much noise and commendation, and said to me, in a low voice—

"I'm afraid that I have put poor old Gapwing out of his element; I will consider myself more of a miserable sinner than usual next Sunday. Then he shall have it *all* his own way."

Sir Benjamin Prout returned thanks in somewhat of an embarrassed manner. He alluded, in a left-handed fashion, that was not without its grace, to his young friend, Mr. Stewart, whose own talents, rather than any help of his, had raised him to so high a position in the merchant world. Then the speech-making was over, so far as the ladies were concerned—the representative of the ladies, Sir John's sister, rose; we imitated her example; the gentlemen rose in their turn to do due honour

to our exit, and then, with a grand rustling of our party-silks, we left the dining-room to the gentlemen, and the door closed upon the last skirt.

The gentlemen were a long time joining us in the drawing-room; the new fashion of not lingering over the wine till the wit was out, and the senses completely befuddled, had not found its way into Sir Benjamin Prout's establishment. Sir Benjamin was of the old school, and kept to the old-fashioned style.

The speech-making continued, we were aware by the hammering of dessert knives and nut-crackers on the dining-room table, and we were left unblest by the presence of the gentlemen to coffee and biscuits. Mrs. Kingsworth took the lead in conversation amongst the ladies; I observed that Sir Benjamin's sister paid her great attention, and deferred in no small degree to her opinion. The conversation presently turned upon Mr. Stewart, who, as I had already guessed, was the *bête noire* of Mrs. Kingsworth; he had attracted more than a fair share of attention at the dinner-table, and many ladies—more particularly the single ones—

were curious concerning him. It vexed me to perceive how severe Mrs. Kingsworth was in her verdict, and how she took it for granted that her assertion, unjust and unsparing as it was, would be confirmed by those who had known him like herself. Miss Prout, for the first time that evening, showed that she had an opinion of her own—a very feeble specimen, and capable of being trained contrariwise—but still an opinion for all that.

"I was much surprised to find Mr. Stewart here—I was not aware that he was so valued a friend of Sir Benjamin's."

"Oh! yes, a very dear friend of my brother's."

"I thought Sir Benjamin was very particular whom he asked to his house?"

"Don't you—don't you really think Mr. Stewart a proper gentlemen to meet here?" asked Miss Prout, nervously.

"I have no right to express an opinion upon the matter, Miss Prout," answered Mrs. Kingsworth; "it is not my place to intimate who should be invited to the banquet. But candidly, I do not like Mr. Stewart—he has all the habits of the

parvenu still, and their obtrusiveness is trying."

"Dear me, I never noticed his habits."

"The glitter of his wealth may bedazzle a few minds," said Mrs. Kingsworth, acridly; "but a little experience quickly detects the flaw in the diamond."

"Sir Benjamin considers him a perfect gentleman; not only as regards his present position, but his past. Why, if you remember, Mrs. Kingsworth, his education is very far above the average. Both the Stewarts were well-taught, and this younger brother studied hard in that little cottage on your estate. I remember——"

"Yes, I remember too," said Mrs. Kingsworth; "we all remember that he was clever enough—I never said that he was not a clever or a sharp man. He has made the best use of his wits through life—he has not neglected the main chance—he is a man whose rapid progress to wealth is worth admiring—oh! yes, I admire him very much!"

Mrs. Kingsworth gave a little emphatic tap on the carpet with her stick, to give force to her expression of admiration; Miss Prout looked dreamily at her; one or two younger ladies shrugged their

white shoulders and smiled; several ladies who were inclined to be neutral sipped their coffee, and looked vacantly over the rims of their cups at the speaker. Mrs. Kingsworth had not quite finished.

"He may thank his early training for his good fortune—he may thank Sir Benjamin for taking an interest in him, and moulding his character for him, as it were. He was a lucky man—some men are born unlucky. I know one man about his age, whose character only required moulding aright in his youth, to have become a great man; he was more clever than Mr. Stewart, but he was ill-trained, and he went wrong. He had no father; he had no good advisers, and his cleverness became a curse, and helped him down to ruin."

Mrs. Kingsworth turned and looked across the room at me; I felt my colour rise, my heart beat quickly; I was sure that she was talking of my brother. What made her think of him at that juncture?—was her interest in her godson greater than I had given her credit for, and did it mortify her pride to see one without John's chances rise to

greatness, whilst he whom we loved better had let every chance go by him?

The gentlemen came lounging in at this juncture, Mr. Stewart leading the procession, as though he had set the example of adjournment; the curate following him, the remainder of the guests looking less grave and orderly, and a few of them—the very old-fashioned "after-dinner men"—walking just a trifle unsteadily.

Mr. Stewart looked keenly round the room as he entered, and then made straight for the vacant chair by my side. He marked his place, and went at once towards it, like a man who had matured his plans before hand. My heart began again its old rapid beats, for some unaccountable reason or other. Why should he wish to sit near me?—to talk to me in preference to many fairer, well-born women?

"Well, that dreary wine-bibbing hour is over," he said, dropping wearily into the chair beside me; "all the vapid compliments that nobody means, and all the free-and-easy anecdotes which every idiot applauds. I trust you have been amusing yourselves more rationally, Miss Casey?"

"I trust so," I replied.

"'No scandal about Queen Elizabeth,' I hope?" he said, laughing; "no fierce onslaught on the morals or manners of the absentees? Why, you are blushing as vividly, Miss Casey, as though I had caught you declaiming against 'that dreadful Mr. Stewart'!"

"I never declaim against anyone."

"I am glad to hear that."

I do not know what business it was of his, but I did not say so. He was certainly a young man who embarrassed me very much to address. Looking across the room, I became aware of Mrs. Kingsworth's intent gaze in our direction, which confused me worse than ever. Mr. Stewart was very observant, for he followed the direction of my eyes, and took stock of Mr. Crease, who was sitting by Mrs. Kingsworth's side.

"Mr. Crease looks very melancholy in the distance, which lends, so far as I am concerned, *no* enchantment to the view," said he. "I think I could wager a good round sum upon our reverend friend's thoughts."

"You are a soothsayer then, Mr. Stewart?"

"Oh! no! Favour me by looking at him *again*, Miss Casey."

I looked at Mr. Crease as directed. He was sitting with his knees pressed together, his toes turned in, his fingers interlaced, and his head very much bent forward, staring in so dreamy a manner across at us, that for an instant or two he was unaware of our intentness in return. Then he gave a spasmodic leap in his chair, turned very red, changed his position suddenly, and nearly upset the coffee tray which the footman was bringing round to him.

Stewart laughed again a little ironically, and said:

"Absent fellows these curates! Mr. Crease was thinking of us—of me in particular, and how I had managed to drop so readily into the seat upon which he had set his heart some time ago. Are you fond of curates, Miss Casey?"

"That is a most extraordinary question, Mr. Stewart," I said, trying not to smile at his *badinage*.

"It's a mere fashion, you know," he said, lightly. "Curates, especially young ones, are great favour-

ites with the ladies, petted and spoiled and made much of on all occasions, to the disadvantage of us poor worldlings. I never accept an invitation to dinner if I know that a curate is asked."

"You are not fond of curates, then, sir?"

"I am envious of them, their goodness *in* the pulpit and their influence out of it. I object to playing second fiddle to a man's imaginary virtues —I am a man of strong likes and dislikes—a positive being."

"So I should imagine."

He looked very steadfastly at me after this reply, as though it had puzzled him.

"You think I am a very conceited, priggish individual, flourishing my egotism a little too much in the air—well, I beg pardon. I apologize—the curate has put me out of temper somewhat—I hate curates!"

"Oh! sir, don't talk in that dreadful manner!"

"Sir Benjamin Prout put me out in the first instance—would you believe it, he would have paired me off with Mrs Kingsworth!"

"And you hate her also?"

"On the contrary, I admire her," he replied;

"she is an old friend, and I know her character well. Bitter with her tongue, unpleasant with her personalities, a little envious of other people's greatness, perhaps,—but as good a woman, with as sound a heart, as it has ever been my lot to meet."

"I am very pleased to hear you say so," I replied, "I had fancied that Mrs. Kingsworth and you were bad friends."

"Fancied so, from Mrs. Kingsworth's manner, I presume," he said, "not from mine. I am bad friends with no one—they who are bad friends with me, misjudge me a little, which is their own fault, and does not seriously affect me. Mrs. Kingsworth would have loved me better had I kept to Wilthorpe Cottage, or, leaving thence, have made good her doleful prophecy."

"What was that?" I asked instinctively.

"She said that my ambition, 'my greed of gain' she called it, would lead me to ruin, and that she should live to see me a beggar yet. Well, the curtain has not fallen, the play is not over, the audience still gape open-mouthed at the man who 'struts his brief hour upon the stage'—we may wind up like

a tragedy with a dire catastrophe, and the lady in the private box will at least go home content with the finale."

"I hope not."

"Thank you. I assure you I hope not also, with all my heart! I shall do my best to ring the curtain down on a happy ever-afterwards scene. Do you like plays and books to end with the dagger and bowl, or the plighting of hands and hearts in the old stereotyped way?"

"To end happily, to be sure."

"Very good. It is not so much in fashion just now as curates are, but we'll do our very best, Miss Casey. So we get round to our old topic of curates, and there is Mr. Crease staring again, and wondering what we are talking about. Were you ever in Edinburgh?"

"No."

"You will like the City—the fairest and noblest of cities, seen from its fashionable side. I am of the business side—the factory side—High Street way. You will be disgusted with my large, dingy warehouses."

He spoke as if I had accepted an invitation to

Edinburgh, and were likely to see him shortly there.

"Do you intend a long stay from home?" I asked.

"One week more, I think—this to oblige Dick, whom I have been endeavouring to seduce from his allegiance to the Kingsworths. It annoys me at times to see so clear an intellect, so shrewd a judgment, thrown away in this out-of-the-way district. What a good fellow he is," he said to me, with increasing animation. "You will say so when you understand him. *That* takes time, but the time will not be ill-spent. It often strikes me," he said, thoughtfully, surveying the tips of his dress-boots, "that I played a Jacob-kind of part with him, and robbed him of his birthright. Sir Benjamin could only advance one Stewart in the merchant world, and I was eager to be gone, and Dick saw it, despite my protestations, and let me go. Sometimes I even think that he is sorry now, although I have—but this is abominably wearisome to you. Shall I get you another cup of coffee?"

"No, thank you."

"That country bumpkin of a waiter has passed me altogether—some one has whispered in the servants' hall that the lanky party is only a business man, and so the flunkey shows his contempt for trade. Here, you, sir," to a footman passing at this moment, with a tray of empty cups—"keep your eyes open; coffee for one, and look sharp! Yes," turning to me again, "you will like Edinburgh very much indeed. I might have made more money in Glasgow, people tell me, but there's good scope for trading in Edinburgh, and much less smoke. They are fine cities though, and the Scotch are fine fellows, all whom I have met. What time has Mrs. Kingsworth ordered your carriage, may I ask?"

"I did not hear any time mentioned."

"She is looking very tired, and even the curate has deserted her. Now, by all the adverse Fates, I'll chance her annihilating glances, and hear my family from the first generation cut up root, branch, and twig. Am I looking pale?"

"Not very."

"But I really am frightened at Mrs. Kingsworth,

and there's some courage necessary to attack an iceberg. Here goes!—wish me success."

He rose, and passed over to the side of Mrs. Kingsworth; a little man, with a very red face, and his white tie under his ear, dropped into his place, as though he had been waiting to pounce upon it. It was Mr. Mannington.

"Hope you have enjoyed yourself, Miss Casey," he said, with his eyes half-closed, and his head on one side.

"I have enjoyed myself very much indeed, thank you."

"Curious man that Mr. Stewart—no making him out exactly, is there?"

"Really I cannot say, upon so short an acquaintance."

"No—ahem—exactly. He's a man one can't very readily take to—he's so deep in his way. You don't see all sides of him—and I like to see all sides of all sorts of things. What has he been talking about now?"

"About Edinburgh, for one topic."

"What a great man he is there, I suppose?" he said, a little maliciously; "what a fine carriage

and pair, and what a princely habitation he has in the fashionable quarter of the town. All about himself, he has been talking, I'm sure?"

I did not feel called upon to satisfy Mr. Mannington's curiosity, and I objected, just a little, to his peculiar tone of address. I had no lengthy explanation, therefore, to enter into, and Mr. Mannington went away a little disappointed.

Mrs. Kingsworth took his place, as if by magic. That blue and silver chair on my right seemed quite a focus of attraction that evening.

"Are you ready for home, Miss Casey?"

"I am at your commands, Mrs. Kingsworth."

"Thank you. We will withdraw, then. A little society goes a great way with me—there's no ring of the true metal here—all base alloy and dross, and counterfeit!"

Mrs. Kingsworth looked very stern and grave; she had been disturbed that evening, evidently she had not enjoyed *herself*. Mr. Stewart had edged his chair to his next neighbour, and was discoursing volubly, with his eyes fixed in our direction. He seemed very grave and thoughtful also, for all his volubility. I did not look in his direction again,

but I was sure that he watched our departure from the room.

"The party will not break up yet awhile—we will not hint that it is getting late, and that we are all getting tired of each other—that's not etiquette, Miss Casey."

"Is the carriage ordered?"

"Yes—we are punctual to the minute."

"And Mr. Mannington?"

"I told him the time before we started. If he has forgotten it, he must walk home in those tight boots of his."

When we had found our shawls in the ante-room, we passed into the hall where Sir Benjamin Prout awaited us—and Mr. Stewart, in a grey great-coat. Mrs. Kingsworth certainly looked daggers at the latter, but he did not wince.

"This is an early flight, Mrs. Kingsworth," the baronet exclaimed, "and you have set a bad example to my friend here."

"Are *you* going, Mr. Stewart?"

"I promised my brother that I would get home early and finish a game at chess with him. Dick and I are inveterate chess-players."

"I regret that I cannot offer you a seat in my carriage, Mr. Stewart," said Mrs. Kingsworth; "is Mr. Mannington aware that we are waiting for him?" she added, turning to her host.

"I—I don't think that he has the slightest idea," said Sir Benjamin, starting off for the drawing-room once more.

Mr. Stewart took this opportunity to state that he had not intended to take advantage of Mrs. Kingsworth's kindness in any way, and that his brother's horse was waiting at the door for him.

"Do not let us detain you, then," was the curt reply.

"May I be allowed to escort you to your carriage?" he said very politely, offering his arm to Mrs. Kingsworth.

The old lady gave vent to an emphatic grunt at this—but there was no help for it, and she placed her hand lightly on his arm. Then he turned to me and offered his other arm, and away we went three abreast along the hall, through the doors, which the footmen held open for us, and down the steps to the carriage.

"Thank you for your attention, Mr. Stewart,"

said Mrs. Kingsworth, when he had assisted us into the carriage, "in the days gone by, I remember you a gentleman less courteous."

"Oh! I haven't changed much. This was a *ruse* of mine."

"A *ruse!*—what for?" was the sharp enquiry.

"To avoid giving the footman a shilling. Did you not see how hungry he was looking, and how impossible it was for me to remunerate him with *both arms engaged.*"

"I will thank you, then, for the convenience we have been to you."

"No, that sounds satirical, and is so unlike my brother's generous mistress."

"Good night, Mr. Stewart."

"Good night, madam."

He extended his hand, but she did not or would not perceive it, and after a moment's pause he turned to me.

"Good night, Miss Casey, I hope to have the pleasure of seeing you again, here or in Edinburgh."

I put my hand in his, and he held it somewhat firmly in his own, and looked at me with that odd almost comical expression again. Then he put up

the steps, closed the carriage door, buttoned his coat over his dress-shirt, and from his tail-pocket produced a Glen-tilt cap, which he put on his head, that had remained uncovered all this time.

"Drive on," called Mrs. Kingsworth to the coachman, "I shall not wait for Mr. Mannington. I cannot waste time here."

Mr. Mannington came flying down the steps like a harlequin. Mr. Stewart had gone in search of his horse by this time, and Mrs. Kingsworth's brother wrenched open the carriage-door for himself and tumbled in.

"Bless my soul, how eccentric of you!" he gasped; "how could I have got home?—why, it's nine miles!—and, oh! dear, these boots!"

"You should have remembered my directions."

"I beg pardon—so I should, Charlotte—I was in the wrong, certainly. And oh! how I have got the heart-burn, to be sure."

"I wouldn't talk any more, then—repose is good for you."

"Ahem—yes."

Mr. Mannington subsided into quiescence in one

corner, the window was drawn up, and the carriage moved at last.

We had left the estate of Sir Benjamin Prout some miles behind, when Mrs. Kingsworth, whom I had imagined asleep, said suddenly,

"You like this Mr. Stewart?"

"I cannot say that I either like or dislike him."

"Possibly not. Let me say, take care of him—he is dangerous!"

"Not to——"

"A man, young, handsome, and rich is always a dangerous acquaintance, and he has been a trifle too gallant, I think. I do not know—I stand reproved if I am in the wrong. You are not to blame," she added, seeing that I maintained a rigid silence, though my heart was fluttering rebelliously; "I blame no one. But if this fine gentleman were to remain much longer here, I should certainly be curious concerning Mr. Stewart's intentions."

A riding-whip cracked suddenly against the glass, frightened Mr. Mannington almost on to his knees, and even startled Mrs. Kingsworth—a woman who never owned to a surprise.

"Good night, ladies," Mr. Stewart remarked, as he galloped rapidly by.

"Bother you!" peevishly exclaimed my mistress.

CHAPTER VIII.

A PIECE OF ISABEL'S MIND.

WE found Isabel Mannington in the drawing-room at Wilthorpe Hall, evidently awaiting our return. Miss Castle, her governess, was seated at the further extremity of the room, away from her; a handsomely-bound volume lay open on the carpet near the governess, its leaves turned under and crushed as though by precipitate contact with the floor.

Miss Castle, full of complaint, immediately hastened to Mrs. Kingsworth. Isabel, who had half-risen, resumed her seat upon finding Miss Castle in advance, and looked defiantly across the room at her.

"Still up, Bel?" said Mrs. Kingsworth.

"She would insist upon sitting up till your return, madam," said Miss Castle, "and I regret to say that she has *not* treated me with that kindness and courtesy which I expect here as my right. She has, on the contrary, set me at absolute defiance, Mrs. Kingsworth; and when I gave way to her and proposed that we should read a little history together, and—and got the book myself from the library—Lyttleton's edition, volume the second, where there is a very fine analysis of Queen Elizabeth's character—she flung it across the room, and said, 'I really don't want to know anything about Queen Elizabeth,' and stormed and raved at me quite dreadfully. And there's the book, just as she left it, and—and—" beginning to sob spasmodically—"I haven't been accustomed to be treated in this manner, and—though I'm sorry to make words—I must claim your pro—protection from a repetition of this un—un—un—unladylike behaviour."

"Bel, what do you mean by this?" peremptorily asked Mr. Mannington.

His sister touched him on the arm.

"Miss Castle is not addressing you, Walter.

Your head is a little dizzy with extra libations—favour me by retiring to rest at once."

"My dear Charlotte, I'm surprised——"

"So am I—and shocked at you. This is a matter entirely between Miss Castle and me. Good night."

Mr. Mannington looked vacantly at her for an instant—yes, his head *was* a little dizzy—and then marched out of the room in quite a military fashion.

Mrs. Kingsworth turned to Miss Castle.

"Be good enough to understand, Miss Castle, that I am not to be worried by any details of the differences between you and Miss Mannington. I object to all complaints of a trivial description, and shall only interfere in those cases of graver importance, which will possibly occur in due course. Miss Mannington objected to history at this hour of the night—very natural, I think. Good evening, Miss Castle."

Miss Castle left off sobbing, drew herself up indignantly, and marched off in her turn. At the door she paused and delivered her parting valediction.

"I am a lady, Mrs. Kingsworth, and have not

been treated like one. Consider, please, that I resign all charge of Miss Mannington after this quarter."

"Very well."

Miss Castle retired; Mrs. Kingsworth loosened the hood of her cloak and sat down in her favourite arm-chair. Her niece looked askance at her, but retained her seat at the table.

"Exit governess number nine! You do not treat them well, Bel—you have no consideration for anybody—you reserve for me, when I come back tired and dispirited, the petty annoyances of a home made miserable by your wretched tempers."

"Miss Castle don't consider——"

"Neither do you. Good night."

Bel Mannington rose, looked at the carpet, walked slowly towards the door, turned, and made an impetuous rush back to her aunt's chair, and put her arms round the neck of the old lady.

"I'm very sorry—I think I'm getting better, just a little, of these wicked ways of mine. You'll not be very cross with me to-night?"

"There, don't crumple my point lace, Bel, like that. Good night."

"Good night, aunt."

Mrs. Kingsworth suffered herself to be kissed on the cheek, but made no demonstration of affection in return. Bel Mannington retired, and Mrs. Kingsworth crossed her hands on her stick, and rested her chin upon her hands in quite a Mother Shipton reverie.

"There's only one man who would make her a good husband—only one man I have ever seen who could subdue her wilfulness, without making her less happy," she said at last.

"You are not thinking yet a while of Isabel's marriage, madam?"

"I am thinking, just at present," said she, her great grey eyes looking up at me without moving her position, "that you have not bidden me good night yet."

"Good night, madam."

I curtsied a little too profoundly, perhaps, at this quiet hint to begone, and went my way to my own room. How long Mrs. Kingsworth sat in that *croning* attitude, alone in that great drawing-room, I cannot say; some one, at a very late hour—in the middle of the night—rustled by the corridor

outside my room, and startled me from the sleep into which I was trying to persuade myself. I thought it was she by her slow precise steps; she had a habit at times of sitting up and ruminating, I learned afterwards, and there was nothing more than commonly eccentric in her manner that night. She was a woman who thought deeply at times—who, perhaps, felt deeply, despite her mask of equanimity. Mr. Stewart had said so; I should know in good time, when our acquaintance was of longer date.

I had not retired to my room at once, and closed the door upon my thoughts. Seated at my toilet-table, I had found Isabel awaiting my arrival.

"My aunt has not detained you long—I thought she would not," said she, upon my entrance.

"You are waiting for me?"

"Yes. I wish to know all about the party—whom you met—how you enjoyed yourself—what you said and did?"

"I met a great many strangers, and a few friends—I enjoyed myself very much, for I was received very kindly—I said little, and did less."

"What friends did you meet?" she asked.

"Faces that were not unfamiliar to me, rather than friends," I hastened to explain—"I met the curate and rector whom we saw last Sunday, and Mr. Stewart."

"The handsome gentleman who sat in the free seats?—whom my aunt speaks against so much, and my father dislikes so heartily, and slanders with such extraordinary vehemence? Why are they all against him here?—what has he done?"

"Risen in the world very rapidly—that's all, I believe."

"That's not fair," said the girl, with extraordinary vehemence also; "but it's like pa and aunt. They're against every one who are not born gentlefolk—I don't understand it yet. Well, what kind of party was it?—any dancing?"

"Not any."

"Nothing but eating and drinking, and you enjoyed yourself—that is, ate and drank a very great deal, I suppose?" she said, laughing: "and I was left at home to read English History with Miss Castle. It will soon be over, though—one more finishing governess, if Miss Castle go away, and then a lady, Miss Casey! Poor Miss Castle, she'll

never forgive me—not that I mean to ask her."

"I should, if I were you."

"Ah! you're the good young lady, who can never do wrong—you're to mould me into an amiable statue, and to watch me step by step, and take care that I remain a credit to you for ever and ever! Miss Casey," said she, suddenly springing up, and bringing her dark face very close to me, "I have been trying very hard to hate you lately."

"I regret to hear it."

"It's true," she said, speaking very rapidly, "for you're against me, *one of the old lot*, companion, custodian, or anything that is equally objectionable to me. You are in my aunt's pay, and will never let me have my own way."

"When it is a good way, I will not attempt to thwart it."

"Are you so wise a woman that you will always know what is best for me?"

"I am afraid not."

"I have been trying to hate you," she said again, looking quite malignantly at me whilst she spoke. "Don't say, when I have succeeded, that I have played a false part, and deceived you. I

know well enough that my aunt cannot trust me, and that you *are* a spy, and it is not very likely I am ever to grow fond of you—is it, now?"

"Not whilst you think ungenerously of me—and give me no credit for attempting to like *you*."

"You'll never succeed. No one likes me—no one ever will! When I am a woman, I shall be *abhorred!*" she exclaimed, with an expression of horror at her future prospects that elicited a smile from me.

She turned upon me for that smile.

"It is very well for you to laugh; you have a pretty face, and people will like you for it, and flatter you. Pretty women must be liked for a time—but I am short and plain, and dark as night. I'm a fright!"

"No more a fright than I am a pretty woman."

"How humble we are! I salute your modesty," she said, with a deep genuflexion. "You're not half so truthful as my maid Em. 'Would not you call me very plain, Em?' I said to her this afternoon, and she said, 'Yes, I should, very!' That's the kind of girl for me!"

"Have you been waiting in my room to tell me this?"

"I have been waiting here for a little talk with you," she said; "the house has been like a vault all day, with one galvanized corpse in the shape of Miss Castle, crawling about the house with books under her arm. And now you, who have been pleasure-taking all the evening, begrudge me a few minutes. Yes, I *do* hate you—there!"

"I believe it not; you're not half so truthful as *your* maid," I answered, quoting her own words.

"Then she *did* speak the truth?"

"Not in my opinion; but you object to my opinions, Miss Mannington."

"Yes," was the answer, "and to you too!"

"Thank you."

"It's not very lady-like to strike you over the head with this hair-brush," she cried; "but if you aggravate me, I shall lose my temper. My aunt aggravates me too much with her satire for me to endure any of yours. I shall go to my room now."

"Good night, Miss Mannington."

"If I have not been entertained much by your graphic descriptions, I have, at least, assured you of my frankness. I am going to hate you, to try and spite you in every way, to balk you in your wishes, and make you jealous and uncomfortable. You will bear this for a time, and then you'll go, like all the rest."

"Yes—I shall certainly go when I am not happy."

"I took your maid away, because I thought you wanted her for yourself. I didn't like her, at first, but I fancied that it would put you out. Has it?"

"Not in the least. She is a faithful girl; if you treat her well, she will soon learn to love you."

"She loves me now."

"Then you are kind to her. I was sure, long ago, that your heart was sound enough. And now, good night."

"And I haven't put you out of temper with all this!" she said, looking wistfully at me. "Isn't there anything that would make you fly into a passion?"

"Oh! yes, many things."

"*Do* tell me! I will not take advantage of your confidence, but I should very much like to know what would turn you into a—*limb*."

"I never confide my secrets into the charge of one who has no trust in me."

"Very well. Keep them all to yourself, and much good may they do you. I have the honour, Miss Casey, to wish you—humbly—and—respectfully—a—very—good—night!"

She sank lower and lower at every word, pausing between each, and spreading out her voluminous white muslin skirt as she descended. It was pleasant irony, and a contrast to her aunt's, and I was in a light-hearted mood, and imitated her. For some unaccountable reason I felt very happy that night—happy with the new world upon which I had now fairly entered. We were three minutes at least indulging in this elaborate salaam, broken short at last by her sudden spring towards me.

"There—I'll kiss you for this once, but I hate you just the same for all that. Good night, Miss Incomprehensibility."

"Good night, Miss Utter-Inconsistency."

We parted thus, and I locked the door upon her. Then I sat down to think of her, and of all the foolish things that she had said about herself and me. About me being a pretty woman, in particular; a natural thing for me to dwell upon, after her half-angry, half-jealous assertion.

Pretty!—was that true? I knew that I was not a *very* ugly woman, but that I was pretty—really pretty!—or that people would like me for it, as Bel Mannington had said, was not to be believed.

Besides, I should not care to be liked for my face alone—that would grow old and withered soon enough. And for my face, or for myself, who would like me, a poor dependent, acting a strange part in this quiet hemisphere? What association of ideas brought Mrs. Kingsworth's words to mind again—suddenly and sharply enough to pain as well as startle me?

Thinking of her niece she had said, "There's only one man who would make her a good husband—only one man I have ever seen, who could subdue her wilfulness, without making her less happy."

Whom did she mean? Not the man at whom she had scoffed so bitterly—surely not Mr. Stewart?

CHAPTER IX.

BUSINESS MATTERS.

TIME went on steadily and quietly at Wilthorpe. Miss Castle and her pupil consented to an armistice, and I have reason to believe that Bel Mannington was the first to propose more amicable terms, and to excuse her conduct on that evening recorded in my last chapter. Mrs. Kingsworth was less severe upon society the following day, and Mr. Mannington less conversational, owing to a headache. Time went on then. Mr. Stewart still kept to his brother's cottage at Wilthorpe, and no rumour of his approaching departure reached our ears; Sunday came round again and found him once more in the free seats of Wilthorpe Church, outraging our sense of propriety by his questionable humility.

He waited for us outside the church this time, however, and left his brother to proceed home alone at the railway pace which he invariably adopted.

Mr. Stewart raised his hat to us as he advanced, then shook hands with Mr. Mannington and me, and would have shaken hands with Mrs. Kingsworth, had she allowed so great a liberty. My patroness bestowed upon him a very formal bow, drew her niece's arm within her own, and continued to move slowly on; he walked by my side with his hands behind him, and his dark eyes intently studying the road at his feet.

"Still in Wilthorpe, you perceive, Miss Casey."

"Yes. I suppose your holiday is drawing to a close?"

"Very nearly so. I am trying hard to make up my mind to beat a retreat."

"Does it require much effort, Mr. Stewart?" asked Mr. Mannington, looking round me to make the inquiry.

"More than I bargained for when I first came hither," he replied; "old attractions and new ones all asserting a claim upon my notice, and holding me back from hard work."

"Your business is in good hands, Mr. Stewart, no doubt," said Mr. Mannington; "who manages now, may I ask, such an extensive firm as yours?"

"Gentlemen I can trust. I am a good judge of honest men, and though it has taken time to form my staff to my mind, I do not regret it. Mine is a model warehouse."

"How many clerks have you now?"

"I'll send you the list when I get back again," said Mr. Stewart, drily; "it may amuse you. I don't like the subject of business when I have set myself apart from it—what a fine day, is it not, Miss Casey?"

"Very fine."

"I admire the even-time, as the poets call it, in Wilthorpe. Particularly the church at even-time, with the shadows stealing into the sacred edifice, and the people quiet and drowsy, and the four candles in the pulpit flickering and guttering with the draught, and good Mr. Crease—your favourite curate preaches in the evening, Miss Casey—telling us of the comfort and blessing of a religious life. You were not at church last Sunday evening?"

"We dined late," said Mr. Mannington.

"And were naturally drowsy after dinner. In the winter time, you have afternoon services here in lieu of evening—no enterprising gas-company having yet started in this village. I must come down at Christmas time, and note the effect."

Mr. Stewart was a little incomprehensible that morning. I could not understand at first his reasons for dilating on the benefits to be derived from attending evening service at Wilthorpe Church. And when I had just a faint suspicion of his reasons, I *would* not understand them!

"You intend to be content with attending church once a-day, Miss Casey?" he asked.

"I have been used to a more regular and close attention to church duties," I answered.

"I would advise you not to neglect them," he said gravely; "it is always a step in the wrong direction to give up a good habit."

I looked at him after this praiseworthy sentiment had been enunciated, but he was still studying the roadway, and kicking stray pebbles before him.

"I was not aware that you were an advocate for

strict religious observances, Mr. Stewart," I said.

"See how easy it is to misjudge a person's character! We are strict people in Scotland, Miss Casey; we understand what is best for us very quickly."

At the great swing gate, leading to the Hall, he shook hands with Mr. Mannington and me again, raised his hat, and crossed to his brother's cottage. I fancied that he looked very strangely, even earnestly, at me as he bade me good morning—so earnestly, that I felt the colour mounting to my cheeks, despite my effort to subdue it. I went on down the drive quite thoughtfully; Mr. Stewart's manner was more eccentric than ever; at Sir Benjamin Prout's dinner-party he had almost scoffed at religion, to-day he had indirectly upbraided the general community at the Hall for their lax observance of religious duties. And that last intent look at me—almost an appealing look it was!—what did he mean by that?—what could he mean?

I had no right to think; I tried to dismiss mundane matters from my thoughts, but he perplexed me still, and troubled me. Despite

all efforts to the contrary, there mingled with my sober reasoning an intense desire to attend evening service at Wilthorpe Church, coupled with an odd reluctance to be seen there, because *he*, perhaps, had implied a wish that I should go. And yet he might not have implied anything of the kind, and it was all very foolish and inconsiderate and wrong of me to think he had. Why should I take credit to myself for occupying, even for one fleeting moment, the thoughts of a man so much more clever and so much higher in position than I was?

Well, I did not go to church that evening, after all. Dinner was not late, but Mrs. Kingsworth desired a companion in her walk through the park, and asked if I would accompany her. Miss Castle, who had not been to church, was going to evening service with Miss Mannington, and I could not gracefully refuse, *even if I had wished!* And when the old lady rested her hand upon my arm, and we both walked slowly and thoughtfully over the crisp dry grass, I was not sorry. I felt that curiosity would have taken me to church rather than a religious feeling, and that this Mr. Stewart —this fine, proud gentleman, who was fond of his

own way—had no right to play the hypocrite, and invent for me reasons, which I did not require, for attending evening service. And there was beneath all a pleasurable feeling that he had not simply willed or wished a thing to make it law—that I had evinced no undue anxiety to meet his wish, follow his hint, or show myself in any way flattered by his interest.

I knew nothing of his character; I had not seen him very often—I could scarcely make out which was real and which was assumed in him—I almost fancied myself into the belief that I was gradually beginning to dislike him.

The next morning I was convinced that he was gradually beginning to dislike *me*, for, returning from a mission to the village, I met him on the high road. My heart certainly fluttered at his approach, but that had imbibed a habit of fluttering at anything lately, which gave me the impression that something was the matter with it. I felt sure that he would stop me, enter into a variety of embarrassing subjects, and leave me more perplexed than ever; but, on the contrary, he raised his hat quite formally, said "Good morning, Miss Casey," and passed on,

with his head very erect, and looking seven or eight feet high at least. This was the real Mr. Stewart, no doubt—the Edinburgh Mr. Stewart—whom nobody liked. I don't know why I should have felt indignant with him at his formality, but I certainly did, and went back to the Hall quite cross with all the world.

On the Thursday following, his brother Richard came to the Hall and offered me an opportunity of studying him in his turn. In his own way he was certainly quite as singular a being as his brother.

He came to the Hall on business, and was shown into the little room where Mrs. Kingsworth and I were seated. This apartment was Mrs. Kingsworth's favourite room before luncheon—a room whose French windows opened on to the green slopes at the back, where the flower garden began. A room with a certain business character about it, possessing a huge secretaire full of drawers and pigeon holes, and laden with various papers. Here Mrs. Kingsworth, a woman of business in her way, was accustomed to write her despatches, make up her accounts,

check her steward and land-bailiff—the latter being Mr. Richard Stewart, as I have already informed my readers more than once.

Mrs. Kingsworth was writing, and I was at the open window at needlework, when Mr. Richard Stewart was ushered into the room. Miss Mannington was in the study with Miss Castle, and Mr. Mannington had gone out on horseback.

"Good morning, Stewart," said Mrs. Kingsworth.

"Good morning."

He looked at me as if he had scarcely made up his mind to bestow a similar greeting upon myself, then jerked out "Good morning," in the same brusque fashion.

"Anything new, Stewart?"

"A little. Peters says he'll sell the land across the Entil for five thousand pounds."

"I don't believe it's worth it."

"I do."

"Why?"

"It will add to the completeness of the estate, and it's a pity to see it pass into other hands than ours. If we don't close with his offer, it will be

put up to auction at the 'Saracen,' Woundell."

"Peters is growing tired of our county, then?"

"He is off to London, I believe."

"Fortune-hunting, like the rest of them—as if everybody were a Mark Stewart, to find wealth and position at the journey's end."

"Mark has been lucky, certainly," said the brother, his voice softening immediately that particular topic was introduced.

"The race is to the most swift—and not yet over. In the times ahead of us, we'll talk of *his* luck."

"I don't fear him giving way. Lord bless you, Mrs. Kingsworth, he'll go on to the end a lucky man."

"Very likely. Now, we'll go on to the end of our business, Mr. Stewart."

"I didn't interrupt—it was you."

"Accept my apologies—you are in the right and I am in the wrong, as usual. Has that man Graves paid the rent due last Lady-day?"

"No."

"Some one holds a bill of sale upon his furniture?"

"Yes."

"He's a professional scamp, and we'll arrest his career, Stewart. Take a writ out against him."

"Wouldn't pay."

"Why not pay?"

"He's dead."

"Oh!"

Mrs. Kingsworth scribbled a few hieroglyphics upon the paper before her; Mr. Richard Stewart sat at a little distance, and watched the progress of her pen.

"One bad tenant the less!" she said after a short pause. "Let us get on with the business, Stewart. You are strangely prolix this morning."

"I prolix!" ejaculated Richard Stewart; "why, I was never prolix in my life."

"Not in your opinion, which is a very good one, so far as it concerns Mr. Richard Stewart," said she quietly; "*do* go on, please."

Mr. Richard Stewart, a trifle put out by Mrs. Kingsworth's assertion, darted into business with fresh decision, keeping himself stubbornly to facts and figures, and adding no remarks of his own on

any of the subjects which he introduced. He spoke very rapidly, and in his usual abrupt fashion, and Mrs. Kingsworth listened attentively, and occasionally made a note of his assertions on the paper before her.

I had leisure to watch Mr. Richard Stewart, to admire his precision in business matters, to see pretty clearly that he was a clever man, who looked shrewdly after Mrs. Kingsworth's interests, and was to her an invaluable servant. He seemed a general factotum, adding to his duties of land-bailiff, those of general collector of the farm rents on the Kingsworth estate, and of an agent in all matters that affected the mundane interest of his mistress. Sitting at my post near the open window, I could study him and detect a likeness about the broad forehead and brown eyes to his younger brother—a fierce-looking resemblance, which his rough hair, wiry and rebellious, and his thick eyebrows, rendered a little comical. Had I heard nothing of his character, I could have pledged my life on that man's honesty of purpose; ignorant of all the details of the business concerning which they dis- [illegible] yet I could frame a story from each fresh

case, as it was tersely and sharply alluded to by Richard Stewart.

"I leave all these matters to you," said Mrs. Kingsworth at last; "you understand the best methods of procedure, and we need not argue upon them. If you have made up your mind, I shall not be able to alter your decision."

"Well, you may alter that of course, but I don't fancy you'll shake my first opinion."

"When does your brother Mark leave Wilthorpe?"

"Next Monday."

"I shall be glad to hear that he is gone."

"Ah! if you only knew him better, madam," said Richard Stewart, almost deprecatingly.

"Still I should be glad," said she, packing up her papers as Richard Stewart rose from his seat; "he is out of place here now. He plays the poor man at your house—when I am a poor woman by comparison with him."

"Not the poor man. He's the same man as ever he was—riches, thank God, haven't warped his heart, or weakened his head."

"He is a very proud man."

"No, he is not."

"Not to you—I do not assert that he flaunts his airs and graces in your face. You are a man to whom they would be distasteful, and he has the good sense to see that. But——"

"Don't run him down, please," said Richard Stewart, holding up one hand, speaking very quickly, and with his eyes very round and distended; "you never understood him, madam, and you never will. He has an honest pride in his good fortune, but it has not turned his heart from one old friend, and it has gained him much esteem. Don't run Mark down, for I shan't stand it."

"I esteem him also, after my own fashion."

Richard Stewart laughed spasmodically, and said,

"What a queer fashion that must be!"

"Yes, it is peculiarly my own," she answered; "and you do not understand it any more than I understand your brother. What are you waiting for?"

"If there's no one in the library, I was thinking of asking permission to replace a few books I have left in the hall."

"And to borrow a few more, I presume?"

"If you please—not if you object," he said tetchily.

"When I object, I always say so," was the quick rejoinder.

"Then I may take the liberty?"

"It is an old privilege of the Stewarts', granted to them in the days before they grew self-sufficient. Your father, and your father's father, were both studious men."

"Ah! and good men, too, madam."

"Have I said anything to the contrary?"

"No."

"Then, good morning."

"Oh! good morning."

Mr. Richard Stewart departed, swinging his Scotch cap in his hand; Mrs. Kingsworth closed her secretaire and turned the key upon her papers.

"That man always does me good," commented Mrs. Kingsworth, "freshens me up for the day, and keeps my faculties from rusting. I cannot overpower him with my greatness or my condescension, and it is amusing, at times, to make him

angry. That is the great difference between him and his brother—there's no disturbing that Mark Stewart's equanimity—a cooler wretch I never met with!"

Mrs. Kingsworth walked about the room for a few minutes, deliberating on the respective merits of the brothers Stewart. She had made half a dozen turns, and was rendering me very fidgety, when Richard Stewart's head appeared round the door.

"Oh! you *are* here still," he said, addressing Mrs. Kingsworth.

"Yes. To what new and brilliant idea are we indebted for your re-appearance?"

Mr. Richard Stewart continued to look at her without replying.

"Oh!" he said, at last, "about Peter's land. Shall we make him an offer?"

"I leave it to you. If you think it worth the money, close with him."

"Very well."

Mr. Richard Stewart withdrew again; Mrs. Kingsworth and I went into the garden. The library —a wing of this extensive mansion—overlooked the

garden also, and as we passed, Mrs. Kingsworth glanced towards the windows curiously.

"He'll waste all day there over the books now, and he had better be attending to his business. That Peters will go from house to house hawking his wretched property—which some improvident Kingsworth sold to his progenitors. The world turns round and brings retribution with it. Peters takes the down-hill road, and it is our turn to profit by his moral decadence. Miss Casey, fetch me a book from the library, I am in a studious mood."

"What book, madam?"

"Any book in the world will suit my purpose, and drive Richard Stewart away. He's as bashful as a baby, for all his bearishness, and he will fly like the wind at your approach. I must have that land!" she said, between her set teeth.

This was a woman of the world still, and one who coveted her neighbour's goods, despite her wealth, her age, even her generosity.

I objected to my task, though I had scarcely a reason to allege for it; I was a little afraid of these Stewarts, and I was doubtful if my presence

in the library would be at all likely to have the effect Mrs. Kingsworth anticipated. She seemed even doubtful herself upon second thoughts.

"Tell him he had better see Peters at once," she called out after me, "and close with him, even for another five hundred pounds, if he hold out. I must not be thwarted in this, and he must do his best."

CHAPTER X.

SUDDEN DECISION.

I FOUND Mr. Richard Stewart walking up and down the great library, with his hands in his pockets, imitating the peripatetic habits of his mistress, only at a rate of progression which was peculiarly his own. He was a man who always walked at a rapid pace, and he was careering round the room now at his utmost speed, paying no attention to the books ranged in their costly bindings on all sides of him.

"Oh! here you are!" he said, as I entered. "I was just cudgelling my brains for an excuse to speak to you. If there's one thing which I abhor, it's an excuse. The man who can't tell the truth, and look you in the face, I have always said is a scamp.

And now I'm a scamp—and I feel like one, and a devilish—beg pardon—rum feeling it is!"

"An excuse to speak to me?" I repeated.

"Yes—odd, isn't it? that I should be running after a young woman, and sneaking about the passages like a confounded fool, ashamed to speak out. Good God!"—with a stamp of his foot that shook the windows in their sashes—"ashamed to speak out!"

"What did you want to tell me, Mr. Stewart?"

"Wait a moment," he said, going to the library door, looking out, and returning, "they're curious servants here—take after their mistress's brother a little. Where's Mr. Mannington?"

"He is out riding."

"What brought you hither? I was coming back to you in a minute. Has Mrs. Kingsworth any idea that I'm prowling about on false pretences?"

"Not any. I was told to ask you to secure Mr. Peters's property at once."

"I secured it yesterday, only I would not tell her, she pretended to be so cool about it. As if she could deceive me!"

"At all events, you contrived to deceive her, Mr. Stewart."

"Thank you—that's a back-hander!" he said. "Oh! yes, I deceived her. And I have been trying to deceive her again, and get a few minutes' talk with you, all the morning. Will you put your bonnet on, and come down to my house as soon as possible?"

"For what reason?"

"Because you're wanted. Don't you believe me?"

"Yes, I believe you, but—but is there any occasion for the mystery?"

"I don't think there is, a bit. My maxim is, out with the truth and shame the old one. You're not to be frightened, Miss Casey, I'm sure?"

"No, I think not."

"So I told Mark, who's an over-cautious fellow, all of a sudden. 'Don't blurt it out and alarm the girl unnecessarily,' he said, as if you were a doll to fall to pieces by a little news."

"I am not frightened, Mr. Stewart—will you kindly explain?"

"Don't think I shall after all. You've turned so pale."

"What is it, sir?" I asked quite petulantly.

"Hollo!" he said, "you learned that of young spitfire—I beg pardon, I am alluding, *in confidence*, to Miss Mannington, who is eccentric in her way, just a little," he added drily; "but if you are about to fly into a passion, why, it's a pity!"

"Please be more explicit, sir?"

"You are quite prepared, then?"

"Yes—quite."

"Your brother John is down at my house, waiting to see you."

"Is he ill?" I exclaimed; "oh! not ill?"

"Not particularly ill, I should think—seedy perhaps," he added thoughtfully; "but I have only had the pleasure of that gentleman's acquaintance an hour or two. He wants to see you—not Mrs. Kingsworth, on any account. There's my commission fulfilled, and now let me get out of this house."

He brushed by me and went out of the library, leaving me more astonished at his news than I had intended to show to him. My brother at Wilthorpe, so soon after my departure from the Cork-cutters' Hall!—my brother anxious to see me, and

tell me that old sad story, which had ever so little change in it! I was sorry that he had come back yet a while; I felt convinced that no good news had brought him hither—that some new scheme, which required Mrs. Kingsworth's assistance and my mediation, was to be communicated forthwith. And yet he had never sought her assistance, nor asked for my help before—why should I think so ungenerously of him? Had I, even at that hour, a fear of his lower estate, and how he would sink step by step away from self-respect, after the sad, stern rule governing lives weak and erring like his own?

I went to my room, put on my bonnet and shawl, and hurried out of the house towards Mr. Stewart's residence. Along the drive I encountered Mr. Mannington riding gaily home.

"Good morning, Miss Casey. Any news?" he said.

"Nothing particular."

"Nothing that concerns you," I was nearly saying in my haste and thoughtlessness.

"I met Master Dick Stewart at the gate. He has been here, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"Business as usual. A capital business man—he has been here all the morning?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Did you hear anything about Peters' land? The man's hard up, and it may be got for a song, I'm told. He ought to see about it, and not idle his time here so much. Are you going to the village?"

"I am going for a walk."

"Rather late for a walk. Luncheon will be ready in half an hour," said he. "It's nothing very particular, I suppose?"

"No."

I hurried away. I was anxious to be gone, and Mr. Mannington's curiosity irritated me. I distrusted him, and the motives for his questioning; I was beginning at least to understand him, I thought. He was less a curious man than a suspicious one. And I felt sure that he looked suspiciously after me that bright morning.

I went on to Mr. Stewart's house. As I opened his little wicket gate, and went up the gravel path meandering through the flower-beds, I heard voices

through the open window—one, the well-known deep voice of my brother.

I had been seen approaching, for Richard Stewart opened the door and admitted me into his parlour. Standing with his back to the empty fire-grate and with his hands behind him, was my brother John—in the arm-chair, a little away from him, and looking up at him curiously and critically, was Mr. Mark Stewart of Edinburgh.

The two had been conversing or arguing. If arguing, John Kingsworth Casey had had the worst of it, which was natural, for a more woe-begone, utterly despondent expression I had never seen on his face before, and yet I thought that I had seen him at the worst.

But I saw him in the broad daylight, and we had met at night for many years; I saw then how sallow he was, how deeply lined, what dark shadings there were underneath his eyes; he looked even taller, thinner than his wont, with that shabby frock-coat buttoned to his chin, and no vestige of collar visible about his neck. The picture of what he had become caused my heart to sink at the sight of him, and my woman's pride

made me regret that the two men at his side should have been witnesses to such an interview as ours.

"Like the bad sixpence again, Bertie," he said, stooping to kiss me, "turning up more often and more often, this dire necessity of mine, as ill luck drives me onward."

"Bad news, then, John?"

"That depends."

I looked towards Mr. Mark Stewart, who had risen to bow politely to me, and then seemed inclined to relapse into his chair again. He took my hint readily enough, and looked in his turn at his brother.

"I propose, Dick, that we leave Miss Casey with her brother."

"No, don't go, you fellows," said John hastily, "there's no occasion—you have heard everything, and perhaps can help us with your advice, if my sister should fail in starting a new idea. Sharp chaps, you two—I wish I had only known you earlier."

"You have told these gentlemen——"

"Everything. Don't look amazed—they guessed

part, and, as the whole of it is no mystery, why, I grew confidential, and they are both very fair fellows—jolly fellows, who will help a man at a pinch. I esteem the couple of them."

I looked at John again. He was not drunk—he might not have been drinking that morning—but he seemed to possess all the weakness of the drunkard, and was familiar, over-cunning, and confidential. I was vexed with him, but I was powerless. I was vexed with these witnesses to his weakness, and vexed with myself.

"If these chaps don't object to hear a story twice, I should prefer their remaining. You'll see why presently, Bertie—it's as plain as noonday."

"Perhaps Miss Casey will allow me, for a reason of my own?" asked Mr. Stewart.

My silence gave consent. Mr. Stewart placed a chair for me, but I preferred to remain standing, facing John.

"The facts of the case, Bertie, are these," began my brother; "I have a chance of getting on in the world. There is no doubt of it—it's a scheme which I can't say much about, because it's a secret at present between four or five of us. The scheme

requires capital which I haven't got—two hundred pounds each will be subscribed, and we shall all go to work with a will and make our fortunes. Probably it will take me abroad—all the better for everybody that," he added with a short forced laugh, that must have pained him to utter.

"And the two hundred pounds?"

"Exactly—there's the great hitch in the proper working of that machinery which is to turn the affairs of John Kingsworth Casey, and lead him on to fortune. Now, look here, Bertie; I went to Cork-cutters' Hall last week, and, for the first time, discovered the great change. I wanted your assistance in concocting a letter, that should explain all to Mrs. Kingsworth; but matters have turned out differently—good luck has placed you in the Kingsworth household, and you can talk to the old lady better than write to her."

"You will not see her yourself?"

"I could not face her for the world. Besides, you are the very girl to help me—Mrs. Kingsworth must have taken a fancy to you, or you would never have been here."

"Go on, John."

"And, after all, I want nothing of Mrs. Kingsworth—that is, nothing particular—only something in advance—two years in advance, and I'll give up four. There's a bargain, that's worth her consideration! I think, Bertie, it might be well argued between you and her, and you could tell her that the money will be profitably employed, and will do what money has never done yet—make a man of me."

"I will tell her all this if you wish it, but I think, John, that you have formed a false estimate of Mrs. Kingsworth, if you expect her to advance the money on so little proof of its being profitably used."

"These friends of mine—hangers-on to the Kingsworth estate in some shape or other, I'll swear!—think the very reverse—consider it a good investment of my god-mother's."

"Certainly a good investment for Mrs. Kingsworth," said Richard Stewart, who was standing with his back to the door; "and I think she'll advance the money. Whether Mr. Casey will make good use of it, is quite another thing."

"And that's my business, you know," said my

brother; "I don't walk into your cottage and tell you everything. But you find out that I'm a Casey somehow, and you give me shelter just in time from that prying old chap on horseback, and you are two fellows of a good sort. I can always tell a good sort with half an eye, gentlemen—and I trust fellows after my own heart."

I could have flown at my brother and shaken him almost, for his foolish conceit, his still more foolish talk. I felt that he had made himself ridiculous in these men's eyes, and showed to them what a dreamer and visionary he was. In all my life, I had never felt more angry with him.

"I can see, John, that you will lose this money," I said; "that it will be thrown away in idle speculation, and you no wiser, better for it."

"It can't go wrong," said John decisively; "it's all arranged—the plans matured—the money's subscribed, all but my share—no one can get in advance of us, and steal our glorious idea."

"Then why keep the matter a secret?" asked Mr. Mark Stewart; "why not let us judge of the advantages to be derived from this speculation?"

"By George! you may if you like," cried my

brother; "I hate keeping in the dark, and talking mystery. We are all friends here, and I am in good hands. It's to do with the Russian war—run the blockade at a Black Sea port, and make our fortunes."

"And only a thousand pounds subscribed?—whose ship is it?"

"I can't tell you that," said John, suddenly becoming sensitive again; "it's all under the rose, you see. Against the laws of the country, sir."

"Setting aside the moral of the thing," said Mark Stewart, "it will not pay. With Prussia as the catspaw for dishonest traders, there is little to be gained by running the blockade. That's my opinion, only—yours is different. What are the names of the gentlemen who have persuaded you to join this hazardous enterprise?"

"Oh! you want to know a great deal too much!"

"I may have heard of these men."

"Not very likely!"

"The ship will start from the Clyde—the Glasgow people are adventurous—I am a Scotchman."

"Oh!" said my brother, looking dubiously at Mr. Stewart; "you're in it, perhaps?"

"No."

"You know something about it?"

"I know that there are a few wild schemes afloat like this in war-time—they answer sometimes, and they bring ruin very often."

"You don't live here, then?"

"This is my brother's house—I have a situation in Edinburgh."

"Ah! that accounts for it. Well," with a sudden burst of renewed confidence; "it *was* started in Glasgow, this idea. I sail from Glasgow—with the cargo—I keep my eye on the material till fairly disposed of."

"That is, you take the greatest risk. Who trusts you with this delicate mission?—an old acquaintance, or a new one?"

"One I have known some years."

"He must have confidence in you?"

"Anyone can trust John Kingsworth Casey," said my brother, proudly; "I have seen much and suffered much, tried many ways of living and fought hard at times to keep from starving, but I have always been trusted, sir. Next door to a beggar very often—but never a scamp!"

"And you prefer this life of vagabondage, successful or unsuccessful as the case may be, to a steady, honest endeavour to work your way in life?"

"I don't say that," was John's quick answer.

"You come hither full of a foolish, dangerous, uncertain scheme—you would sacrifice four years of the salary allowed you by your godmother for two hundred pounds in hand?"

"It's a chance that may never occur again."

"Thank God for it!" growled Richard Stewart from the door.

"You don't say that you prefer it," said Mark Stewart, quoting my brother's previous assertion; "you could settle down to desk work, regular task work, and be happy."

"No one would try me now," said my brother, turning to him almost fiercely; "I have lost my chances in life—through my own fault, no one else's, I own that!—I am a *mauvais sujet*, whom the world will turn its back upon, or thrust away, until my good genius sets me on a pedestal again. All gone, sir," he cried, spreading both hands in the air, and then letting them drop to his side;

"and only out-of-the-way ventures left for such as I am. I went wrong of my own accord, and the world knows it, and, very properly, won't trust me. I don't complain—I have brought the consequences on my own head, and, what is more, I don't despair."

"You are not a desperate man, then?"

"Ha! ha!—ask Bertie that!"

"I will ask her, if she will allow me, what hope she has of this *mauvais sujet?*"

Mr. Stewart turned to me. I felt that he was not asking all these questions from mere curiosity, that some new idea—could it really be for my brother's benefit?—was in his head; but I knew not how to answer truthfully. I had no confidence in my brother, or in any principle strong enough to keep *him* strong.

"I will hope and pray still for his better life," I answered.

"You hear that," said Mr. Stewart to my brother; "now listen to me, Mr. Casey, and take the advice of a man who has seen a little of the world. Give up this scheme dishonest to the State, and take a place of trust that I will offer you.

The salary is not large, but will increase, as you increase in value to the firm. I have an idea that you are a clever man, who has gone wrong—if I set you right, and you retain cleverness, we shall get on together, and I shall be no loser by the offer. Supposing you sink again, which is likely, at least do not accuse the Fates for keeping the doors of hope for ever shut in your face. Will you go through, or turn back?"

The offer was singular as well as sudden. Had this Mr. Stewart, whom I had imagined a fair judge of character, been deceived by my brother's stagey manner, and framed from it a false estimate? A kind and generous offer on the one hand, to be gratefully accepted on the other, to alter the whole tenor of my brother's life, or but help to prove once more his sad instability.

My brother turned red, shifted from one foot to the other, looked with more intentness, even more manliness, at Mr. Stewart.

"You mean it?" he said; "what are you, then?"

"A merchant—resident in Edinburgh."

"And you will trust me?—a man whose worst side you have only seen?—who has proved what

a weak and babbling ass he is, and told you what he has been?"

"You attribute your present life to the want of chances in your favour. I offer you one more."

"I'll take it."

Was I glad or sorry? God knows! It was impossible for me to tell just then. My brother shook hands with Mr. Stewart, and murmured a hasty expression of thanks.

"When shall I go?"

"At once, please," said Mr. Stewart quietly.

"Now, do you mean?"

"This moment. You are a man of impulse, and it will keep your energy alive to begin immediately. Am I too precipitate?"

"No—I will go now."

"You will catch the train at Peterborough for the North," Mr. Stewart said, looking at his watch; "there will be no difficulty in procuring a conveyance at the village—may I offer you your first week's salary in advance?"

"N—no, thank you," said my brother colouring; "I have money."

"You understand book-keeping and accounts?"

"Yes, pretty well, considering how little practice I have had lately."

"Wait one moment, then."

Mr. Stewart walked to a side table, opened his brother's desk, and dashed off a hasty note, which he sealed, and then tendered to John, saying,

"The address on the envelope is the address of the chief clerk at your employer's—now, bid your sister good-bye, and let us see the back of you."

My brother appeared a little discomfited by this summary method of settling things, but he put the note in his pocket and turned to me.

"I will say good-bye, then, Bertie. This is a queer ending to my scheme, which *was* a little dangerous after all," said he; "now I am going to turn over a new leaf. You need not tell Mrs. Kingsworth that I have been as far as Wilthorpe, or what new change has come over the spirit of my dream. Wait till I write to you, girl. How's Em?"

"Well."

"And happy, I hope?"

"I think so."

"Poor Em! Keep the matter a secret altogether, then, from everybody here. Good-bye, once more."

At the door he paused, then turned back and stammered forth,

"Perhaps it would be as well, Mr. Stewart, if you were to advance me a little money on account. To tell the truth, I have been driven into a corner lately."

"I have money, John," I hastened to add.

He did not heed my remark, but took the money which Mr. Stewart placed in his hands, thanked him, and departed. He went out into the sunshine with a lighter step, and started on his way to meet the new chance which had been offered him. I watched him very sadly and thoughtfully from the doorway, till Mr. Stewart's voice, close in my ear, startled me.

"You do not approve of my plans, Miss Casey?" he said.

"Oh! sir," I said, turning to him, "I do not know how to thank you for your kindness to my brother. But I am bewildered—and if, like a

selfish woman, I approve of your plans, at least, I do not understand them."

"Have I acted in so singular a manner?"

"Yes—I think so."

He laughed.

"I don't."

"You have faith in my brother? You hope to make a good servant of him?"

"There is his chance before him," he answered, evasively; "can I say more? I have, at least, turned him from a scheme that would have unsettled him from any sober, practical calling, for ever. We consider this a secret, all of us?"

"Yes. He wishes it."

"What do you think of my 'eccentricity,' Dick?"

"I am trying to make it out," said Richard Stewart; "give me an hour's consideration, and I shall see your motive."

"No, don't try, Dick," said his brother, quickly; "sufficient for the day is the motive thereof. You had better see about our dinner."

"That's sensible advice, at any rate. Where are you going?"

"A little way back with Miss Casey—if she will allow me," he said, looking very humbly towards me.

"If you wish to go out of your way—how can I refuse you?"

"On the contrary, it is just in my way, and exactly to my taste," he said.

We went across the road together. He opened the great swing-gate for me, and then passed through after me, and took his place by my side. He seemed inclined to offer me his arm, thought better of it, and walked on for some moments in silence.

"You are very sad, Miss Casey," he said, suddenly.

"I am low-spirited—I cannot tell why," I answered. "Seeing my brother so suddenly has disturbed my equanimity. I shall be better presently."

He was silent again; then suddenly spoke of my brother, and asked me many questions concerning him and his antecedents. I disguised nothing; I gave him, to the best of my ability, a clue to my brother's character; he would be the master, and

would understand John better, and be better able to act for the good of one whom he had so suddenly enlisted into his service. And again I thanked him, more heartily than I had done at first, for the helping hand which he had offered to a "ne'er do weel."

"I object to thanks in words," he said, when we were nearly at the end of the drive, "let me test your gratitude in another way."

"What way, sir, will be most acceptable to you?"

"You were not at church last Sunday evening, although you knew well enough that I wished you to be there. Next Sunday evening—the last I shall spend in Wilthorpe—I hope to see you. If I have hoped too much, or said too much, don't come!"

He spoke very hurriedly, and I could not have stopped him, if I had wished; if I had seized as quickly the meaning of his words, as he had intended to convey it. I was confused, tremulous, and in dream-land, long after he had vanished away from me, and left me much to think about.

CHAPTER XI.

CROSS-EXAMINATION.

I WAS confused at luncheon that day; I was more confused at dinner, although I had had three or four hours to consider the sudden whirl of events which had brought my brother on the scene, offered him one more chance of rising in the world, shown Mr. Stewart in the new character of a benefactor, and finally in a character which I could not define, which I would not try to define, lest foolish dreams or vain imaginings should make me unlike the staid woman I was pleased to think myself.

I made up my mind early in the afternoon not to think about it; although making up my mind to impossibilities resulted in no good, and added a head-ache to my heart-complaint. Making up my mind confused matters inextricably, and

rendered me dull and stupid, even a subject for the observant eyes of Mrs. Kingsworth to dwell upon. Every instant, at dinner, I expected an acrid comment on my embarrassment, a few sharp words, to cut like steel through the reserve which engulphed me against my will.

But the dinner went off quietly, more quietly than usual, for even Mr. Mannington was inclined to study his plate intently. His daughter Isabel was the most conversational of the party; she had become good friends again with Miss Castle, and nothing had occurred to disturb the even tenor of her way that afternoon. She was puzzled a little at the extra degree of thoughtfulness evident amongst her seniors; but she treated the matter lightly, and "deared" Miss Castle every other minute. I was conscious of Mrs. Kingsworth directing her glances towards me more than once; I knew that she was studying my new mood, and framing a reason for it, and I nearly dropped my fork into my plate upon suddenly meeting her steady, curious gaze directed across the table at me. But she spared me her remarks on a behaviour that vexed myself, for it betrayed me, and I was grateful for her silence.

She was more severe upon her brother Walter, who came in for all the acrimony which she had to spare that evening. After dinner we ladies went into the garden, bare-headed and uncloaked, leaving Mr. Mannington to his extra glass of claret. The summer evenings had stolen upon us then, and we could venture forth without taking any precautions against treacherous East winds. It was a fair summer evening indeed; fair as the hopes which might be brightening for me in life, and which I could but dwell upon, despite my efforts at composure. The garden full of flowers; the deepening grey sky, serene and cloudless; the evening star beginning to glimmer forth before all the daylight had stolen away westward.

I was certain that my mistress was anxious to engage me in conversation, to sift to the bottom of the mystery which lay between her and me. She possessed the inquiring spirit of her family, I was sure; every-day was giving me clearer evidence of her interest in all that moved and breathed around her, and which interest it was her pleasure and her eccentricity to ignore. But Isabel Mannington had passed her arm through mine and constituted

herself my sole companion for that evening, leaving Miss Castle to the society of Mrs. Kingsworth.

"Don't suppose," she said saucily, "that I am getting any fonder of you by this manifest preference, Miss Casey. Only I am so dreadfully tired of 'the finisher'!"

I was glad of her society; it was a refuge from the inquiring spirit of my mistress, whom I strangely feared that evening. We wandered away from Mrs. Kingsworth and Miss Castle, and Bel gave vent to all her exuberance of spirits, and was more lightsome, winning, and lovable than I had hitherto known her. "If it were possible to stereotype that particular mood," I thought, "what a comfort to herself and a benefit to all her friends it would be!" I even implied as much, half jestingly, and she drew herself up at once with a mock pride that made me smile. She was not lovable after that.

"You would soon grow weary of this style," she said, "almost as soon as I should. I abhor people always alike!"

"When their one mood is of the disagreeable order, I am of your opinion."

"When their mood is of any order, or disorder,

Ber—Miss Casey," she corrected, "it is all the same to me. Now, you are always alike."

"I am very sorry, for your sake."

"You need not be sorry for my sake," she said quickly, "although I should like you better, if you were not inclined to look good. Goody people are dreadfully monotonous!"

"Very trying to people who are not goody."

"Exactly. Therefore I should like to see you in a nice passion, flinging things about the room, stamping and scolding, or even looking sulky. You'll die early if you go on like this—you're much too good for this world, Miss Casey. I suppose that is the reason why you Caseys are so few and——"

"Take care!" I said, turning suddenly upon her. For the first time in our acquaintance together she had deeply wounded me.

She coloured and looked rebellious for an instant; then the force of her invidious comments, and how they might affect me, arrested her.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Casey," she said hastily; "mine were not fair words to fight with. You and I are at least alike in this particular—our

mothers left us early. Talk of something else, please, or let us go indoors."

We went indoors; shortly afterwards I feigned an excuse to retire to my room. As I bade Mrs. Kingsworth "Good night," she said, in an under tone,

"I am coming to your room presently. Sit up for me."

I was about to reply, when she checked the impulse by that sharp, expressive look, which it was in her power to command, and I retired discomfited. I was disappointed likewise. I had been anxious to turn the key upon the world at Wilthorpe, and give up that resistance to thought which I had vainly attempted. In my narrow conceit—which the reader knows was my reigning foible—I had imagined that I could keep all thoughts in subjection to my powerful will, and that that which harassed or distressed me was as easy to lay aside as my Sunday silk. I had awakened to the consciousness of my weakness to resist thought —to let things take their course, and not disturb myself by hopes and fears of events which might never occur. I had found that it was better for

me to give way, and fancy the future which was waiting for me, and which the hasty words of Mr. Stewart had already changed so much.

And now even this new step was denied me thoroughly; Mrs. Kingsworth wished to intrude upon my reverie, and harass me with questions that it might not be in my power to respond to.

I tried to snatch at thought in the time left me before my mistress's arrival; I sat myself down to think at the open window—my favourite place for reverie—looking out at the quiet landscape, and the star-sown sky. How long I thought, even what I thought about in detail, it would be difficult to determine; there was no marshalling my ideas into order, and letting them file one by one before that judgment which was to pass sentence at once, and so settle the matter. All was confusion—all was still confusion, when a hand was laid upon my shoulder as I sat there. I turned to confront Mrs. Kingsworth, and discovered Emma Eaves.

"Why did you not knock?" I asked, somewhat tetchily.

"I have knocked twice, and you would not answer. May I speak to you now?"

"Yes, Emma—what is it?"

"I want to tell you that I am tired of this life—that I am not happy here," she began at once, in that old excited, fretful way, which I had seen more than once—for the first time in her deserted home at Spitalfields, "and that I want to go away!"

I closed the window at once, and became all interest in her troubles.

"Sit down, Emma—let us talk quietly of this new folly together."

"It's not a new one—I've been thinking, oh! so long about it!"

"I thought that you were happy here with your young mistress—that you had learned to love her" —did I add this a little jealously? God forgive me!—"more than anyone in the world."

"I love her because she is something like myself, unhappy, wild, and almost friendless; but we don't agree—she's contrary."

"We must not think too much of *others'* failings, Em."

"I know what you mean—no," she answered.

"Is this the reason why you are so quickly tired of Wilthorpe, Miss Mannington, and me?"

"I don't know what is the reason—I can't settle down—no one tells me anything as John used—I'm not trusted, I can see that as quickly as anybody can. So I've come to you to say that I shall go away from here, and that you mustn't be surprised if they can't find me one of these fine days!"

"I shall be surprised and grieved."

"I'm sorry, but it can't be helped."

"Have you any idea of another home?"

"His, if I can find it—if you will tell me?"

She had sat down at my request, but had risen and advanced towards me, with her dark eyes aflame with excitement. What did she suspect?—what had she discovered?

"Tell you!" I answered, by way of taking time for further consideration as to the best course to adopt with this one-idead girl.

"You know where he is—you saw him this morning! He was here, and never asked to see me, and no one—not one of all this lot here!" she cried, vehemently, "thought of me, who took care of him so long!"

"Who told you he was here?"

"I heard Mr. Mannington tell Mrs. Kingsworth so when he came home on horseback."

"Mr. Mannington knows him, then?"

"Yes, I think so."

"All this is very strange, Emma."

"And all true. He *was* here—down at Mr. Stewart's house!"

"Yes."

"I passed you and Mr. Stewart at the back of the high laurels this morning, and ran down to the cottage, but he had gone—gone away again without a word!"

"Let me explain, Emma. He came here on business, not with a wish to see us, I fear. He stayed but a little while, spoke but a few words to me, and then went away once more."

"He is poor—wretched!"

"Not a rich man, certainly. But the chances of doing well are in his favour, if he will avail himself of them. You and I, Em, should be glad of that."

"It doesn't matter—it will come to nothing," she said; and, though I had thought so too, her words made my heart sink.

"We will pray for the best."

"He is alone—he hasn't me with him—he must go wrong. Did he speak of me at all?"

"Yes—he hoped that you were well and happy."

"He did not care to see for himself; if I could only hate him, as I thought I might do once, when he turned away from me; if I could only think as little of him as he does of me. Wasn't he a father to me when mine died—a brother to me when I kept house for him—and now to turn away like this!"

She stamped upon the floor, and flung her arms wildly in the air. The girl was scarcely sane in her affection for my brother, I thought, with a shudder—she was a monomaniac, whose very gratitude was of a morbid character.

"You are unsettled by what you have overheard—you will be calmer in the morning. We must trust to time, Emma."

"Easy to talk like that," she said, "you, who are turning against me like he did!"

"You are mistaken, Emma."

"Where has he gone? Did he not say? Don't you know?"

I hesitated, and she cried:

"You know—and you'll not tell me! I see it in your face!"

"I know, but I cannot tell you yet awhile."

"You will not!"

"I dare not."

"Then you are against me, and I'll not think of you any more. I'll be revenged for it, mark my words, Miss Casey!—I'll turn against you!"

"I hope not, Emma."

"You will not tell me what I wish—the only thing I wish to know, you hide away from me. You, who have pretended to do me good, and keep me good, and have brought me to this den! Never ask me after this to tell you anything, remember that!"

She darted out of the room like a young Pythoness, and slammed the door behind her with a violence that echoed along the corridor, and shook every window in the wing. Truly this girl was hard to manage or to comprehend, and I had more charges than one at Wilthorpe. I must see her in the morning, and reason with her more dispassion-

ately. To-night there was Mrs. Kingsworth to confront still—Mrs. Kingsworth, who, I had learned from Emma, was already acquainted with John's visit to the cottage.

I became quite nervous waiting for Mrs. Kingsworth that night; if she were aware of my brother's coming to Wilthorpe, what did she wish to say to me?—what to discover? When would she come and end this suspense, which preyed upon me, quickened the action of my heart, rendered my room so oppressive, that I once more threw up the window, and let in the cool night air into the place made feverish by my thoughts? There was mystery somewhere, and it was embracing me within its folds, and making actions that were common-place to others, part and parcel of some plot, concerning which I knew nothing, save that it existed.

The house was full of noises that night; the servants would never tire of walking about the corridors; the doors would close and open by restless hands, and no one would settle for the night, and leave a sense of quietness about the Hall. She came at last. As she tapped upon the panel

of the door I looked at my watch instinctively. Half-past eleven—late for the Hall folk.

She came in at her orderly pace, as usual; but it was not the grave, quiescent face which I had grown accustomed to, or even learned, with all its apathy, to have some liking for. It was a disturbed face, for all the effort to maintain thereon that set, unnatural expression, she was proud of—the eyes were brighter, and the two red spots upon her cheeks were new to me.

"I thought they were all sitting up to-night to spite me," she said. "I was forced to tell Walter how heartily tired I was of him, and how unbearable his presence had become."

As she advanced, I noticed that she had lost her cap coming along the passages, and a very weird-looking and Hecate-like head it was, with its grey hair somewhat dishevelled, and one stray lock, which I had not seen before, and which was as white as snow, trailing down her back.

She turned the key in the lock, and pushed a chair before her as far as the toilet-table, then sat down, and laid her gold-headed stick across her lap.

"Shut that window, please," she said. "I am too old for these fresh-air whims!"

I complied with her request, and then sat down facing her.

She looked me full in the face, and said:

"You know what I have come hither to talk about?"

"Yes."

"That scamp and knave who bears your name, and who has been hiding in Stewart's house to-day, away from me."

"My brother, madam."

"Call him what you please, and intimate as much as you please what amount of respect is due to him for your sake—your brother. What did he want?"

"In the first place, Mrs. Kingsworth, let me ask you how Mr. Mannington first became acquainted with my brother?"

"They are not acquainted—Mr. Mannington knows him by sight, that is all. I have pointed your brother out to him."

"He is aware——"

"Of nothing that I choose to keep him in the

dark concerning," she added; "do not be alarmed. Your brother wanted to see me—he called at the Stewarts'—Richard Stewart delivered his message, and you went down to the cottage to receive your brother's statement. You have not been very anxious to communicate the message entrusted to you—I can compliment you upon your *sang froid*, Miss Casey."

"There is a little mistake, Mrs. Kingsworth," I said, "I have no message to deliver."

"He did not come to Wilthorpe with any intention of seeking my help—my money?"

"At least, he altered his mind, madam, and went away entrusting me with no commands."

"You persuaded him?"

"No."

"What made him go to Richard Stewart's house?—he does not know the Stewarts—he has never seen them before."

"He intended to see me in secret, and he was afraid of being discovered. Mr. Mannington riding out this morning led him, I believe, to turn suddenly into the cottage."

"What did he want? If he altered his mind,

and there is no secret connected with his coming, I, as his godmother, and one who has shown fair evidence of interest in his career, claim my right not to be kept in the dark."

I allowed that right, and told her of the scheme which he had had in view.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Was ever man so weak and childish!—so open to receive a bad impression, and yet so hard and stubborn to set right! Go on. What made him change his mind before the attempt upon my purse was perpetrated?"

"Mr. Stewart thought the scheme for making a fortune not only impracticable, but full of risk."

"Mr. Richard Stewart?"

"No—his brother."

"And, contented with this verdict, the man goes back to London. I can't make that out."

Had I a right to tell her further?—to let my brother's future course be clearly indicated? I did not know, and my hesitation betrayed itself.

"Bertha Casey," she said, "you are keeping

something back from me. God knows for what reason you consider it right to throw dust in the eyes of the only friend he has—or what suspicion has arisen in your mind against me. Do you doubt *me* being his friend?" she exclaimed with a fervour and passion that rendered her a true woman at last, "or that I would not serve in any way or at any cost the real interests of that unhappy man for whom I stood sponsor in his baby-hood? Had he grown up true and honest, he would have had my money; he has grown up weak, wilful, and false, but he has my interest still, and I would do my best for him. Concerning him there must be no secrets—your brother, but my godson, for whom I vowed and protested much—more than most time-servers mean when they ape a ceremony that should have weight with them. Woman, tell me all, or I shall curse you presently."

"Mrs. Kingsworth, I am sure that I can trust you," I said; "it is not from any want of confidence in you that I hesitated in the first place. After all, it is scarcely a secret, and I am not bound to disguise anything from one who has been

kind and generous to my family. He has gone to Edinburgh."

"To Edinburgh!—well?"

"He has accepted a clerkship in Mr. Stewart's firm there—Mr. Stewart has kindly offered him one more chance of living respectably and honestly."

The stick dropped from her lap to the floor with a rattling noise, that jarred upon my nerves; she pushed her grey hair back from her temples, which she held with both hands, and looked at me wildly! What did it mean?—whence this intensity of interest?

She remembered her old character suddenly, but it was too late, and the acting was clumsy this time.

"I—am—not—surprised!" she gasped; "strange things happen every day in a world where inconsistency of conduct is the rule. I am too old to be surprised at anything *now!*"

She picked up her stick, rested her thin, large-veined hands upon it, and forced herself, as it were, back into herself. A wonderful power of self-repression this woman possessed; it amazed me to

sit there a witness to the rapidity with which she drifted back to her cold, unsympathetic, every-day demeanour. But her true self had been suddenly developed, and for ever after that night I saw her clearly through the veil.

"Nothing more to say, Miss Casey?"

"I have told you all."

"I believe you—a want of truthfulness has never been one of your failings," she said. "You and I understand each other pretty well, considering the shortness of our acquaintance. This Mr. Stewart—what reason did he allege for a step so utterly at variance with common sense?"

"He gave no reason, madam."

"And you guessed none?"

"I guessed no reason either."

She leaned her chin upon the back of her hands, in her characteristic fashion, and looked at the window, through which the stars were shimmering still.

"This requires a little thought; Mr. Stewart not being Quixotic, renders the whole affair somewhat misty. I must think this over."

She never mentioned it again, and I, who

learned the reason a few days afterwards, did not feel compelled to tell her *that*.

"Good night," she said, rising suddenly, "these are late hours for a woman seventy years of age. I am as weak and frivolous as the rest of my family."

She unlocked the door, looked back at me, nodded her head, and then went slowly and methodically along the dark landing to her room.

CHAPTER XII.

MR. STEWART'S INTENTIONS ARE MORE EVIDENT.

WE had assumed our old characters the following day—once again orderly, matter-of-fact people, ignoring the existence of a little romance, or mystery, about us. Quiet country people, vegetating in an out-of-the-way part of England, undisturbed by the stir and hum of cities, and apart from all the excitement which appertains to city life.

The next day, which was Friday, I commenced by thinking of yesternight's incidents—as the hours stole on, of yesterday's. Emma Eaves's excitement belonged to the past, equally as much as her despair in Whiffen Street; and when I kept my promise of seeing her in the morning, I found her a trifle sullen in demeanour, and disinclined to dwell upon my brother's actions. That question

dismissed, and Mrs. Kingsworth's new phase of character surmounted, what was left me to think about, save and except this Mr. Stewart, whose whims and fancies had disturbed more than me since he had honoured his brother's house by his presence?

Nothing to think about except Mr. Stewart, then; my task to revert to my first and greatest bewilderment, and wonder what he intended by his parting words—or whether he intended to convey anything save a request to see me next Sunday evening, and say good-bye for ever. Very likely it would be good-bye for ever; he had implied more than once that it had been a sacrifice of time, almost of inclination, to return to a place where he had been known as a poor, ambitious man; he had been out of his sphere at Wilthorpe, and in Edinburgh he was a great man, whom everybody sought. He had acted in a singular fashion since his stay here; I had failed to wholly comprehend him; he was pleased to be more than commonly eccentric—to distract me, just a little, by his notice, his satire, his odd remarks on men and things around him. It was more than "very likely" even,

I thought, with a heart that swelled *not a little*, that he had been laughing at me in his sleeve—making my little knowledge of mankind the target for his superior worldliness. He had been hipped to death at Wilthorpe, and sought a mild excitement to sustain him. He meant nothing but a jest—and I would see it to the end like a pleasant play, and think no more of him, or his peculiar pleasantries, after the curtain had fallen between us.

Still, he had been kind to my brother; he had been earnest then—there was no jest in his brown eyes when he offered the prodigal a new position in life. My brother had awakened his interest, and Mr Stewart had quickly, and with even too little consideration for results, taken him into his service. I was grateful for his kindness; if he had smiled at my simplicity, I would forgive him; if he wished to see me on Sunday evening at church, I would appear there, if it were possible.

Yes, I would go to church, at his wish. I might be a little curious to know if he would speak of John again, and a little anxious not to let him go away from Wilthorpe without saying good-bye—

just the least degree in the world anxious about that, I began to fancy, when Saturday came round, and those troublesome palpitations set in again—caught me on the stairs, and made me stop—arrested my utterance in the middle of my talk about the weather—extemporized balls of immateriality in the middle of my throat, and gave me a sense of suffocation, without any valid proof that I was choking.

Sunday came round, and fair weather with it still. We all went to church that morning, Mrs. Kingsworth, Mr. Mannington, Isabel, Miss Castle, and I. Emma Eaves came in some minutes after us, with all the Kingsworth household that could be spared. The church was very full—the fine day lured out the old and weak, who had been nursing themselves all the winter and spring indoors. Mr. Richard Stewart was in his place, of course—Mr. Mark Stewart sat in the free seats, and exulted in his humility, as usual. Mr. Crease read the prayers, and delivered the sermon—Mr. Gapwing having been seized with gout late on Saturday afternoon, a calamity that was bad for him, but beneficial to his congregation.

I had a hard struggle to keep my thoughts away from the one subject that had bewildered me all yesterday, but I succeeded, and if Mr. Stewart had had any intention of meeting my glance, and intimating his old wish by any pantomimic or facial expressions, he was disappointed. He went home arm-in-arm with his brother, waiting for no man or woman at the church porch. Mrs. Kingsworth, looking after them both hurrying indecorously from worship, said sarcastically:

"They have a pie for dinner in their oven, and are afraid of the crust catching, I'm sure. That pie was on Mr. Stewart's mind all church-time."

He had been thoughtful, perhaps abstracted—and, sinner that I was, I did not feel depressed at his irreverence.

Luncheon—a short walk in the afternoon across the park, Mrs. Kingsworth's hand upon my arm—a dinner at half-past five—at six o'clock, *the rain!*

"Just the thing we have been waiting for, the last two weeks," said Mr. Mannington, rubbing his hands together; "good for the crops, the grass-land, everything. This will cheer the hearts of the farmers like a legacy."

"Will it last, sir?" I asked, quite nervously.

"It will last four-and-twenty hours, or I am no prophet," said he; "a small, steady, soaking rain. Beautiful!"

"I had made up my mind to go to church to-night," said Isabel.

"Then I would advise you to calm your religious fervour, and do your best to amuse your aunt," said Mrs. Kingsworth. "Men and women who risk all kinds of chest-complaints, and walk a mile in inclement weather to church, are hypocrites!"

Mrs. Kingsworth did not mean this, but she wished us all at home this evening. I saw her looking at me even as she spoke—me, who had made up my mind to go!

After dinner Mr. Mannington walked to the window, and stood with his hands behind him, rapt in admiration of the wet—Isabel and Miss Castle passed into the drawing-room with Mrs. Kingsworth—I followed them, lingered for a few moments there, sitting on the sofa like a culprit, and trying to reason myself out of my palpitations.

I wonder why I was so anxious—so embar-

rassed—so conscious that I was going to church not for the church's sake—so positive that I was worthy of all the bitter words which Mrs. Kingsworth had lately said concerning church-folk. I did not wish to steal forth from the house like a thief—and yet I wished to escape the looks of surprise which would follow the announcement of my intention, escape the suspicions of one or two minds prone to leap to unreasonable conclusions. No, I had not the courage to say that I was going out that evening; the wind was rising, and the rain-drops began to hurl themselves fiercely against the glass.

"What a night!" exclaimed Mrs. Kingsworth; "ring for lights, Isabel, and shut that dreary landscape out of sight."

I went from the room slowly, and then hastened to my own room, dressed myself with nervous hands, took the new silk umbrella to which I had treated myself on my last birthday out of its case, pinned my skirts together in a housewifely manner, and then went downstairs—very much like a thief indeed!

At the bottom of the stairs I paused to consider

whether I was acting decorously—whether I should not look anxious in Mr. Stewart's eyes—whether I had a right to go to church at all that night—whether it were maidenly or proper to wish in my heart to see him just once more! I went on again without solving the vexed question, passed the drawing-room door and heard Mr. Mannington's voice within, crossed the hall, opened the door, and tripped hastily and nervously down the steps, drawn by a spell for what I knew to the contrary, so irresistible it seemed, and so atrociously wicked and designing I considered myself.

The wind and rain met me on the gravelled drive at once, unceremoniously dashed in my face, sent my bonnet on to my shoulders, and turned my umbrella inside out. Then there ensued a struggle against the wind, the umbrella outside in again, and I running for the avenue, where the elements were less riotous. I remember looking back at the drawing-room windows, noting the drawn curtains and the lights behind them, and feeling grateful for those little advantages in my favour.

Then in the avenue, butting my way through the wind and rain, and doubtful which way they were

coming at me; and convinced at last that they came all ways at once, and I had better keep to the high hedge side, lower my umbrella, and run for it. I drew the thick cloak over my bonnet and ran then; I was nervous and excited, and half-inclined to cry at last at my own folly which bore me onwards in spite of my reserve. At the gate I stopped and clung to it, and thought for the last time. Was I right in going?—what would he think? oh! what would he think?

The bell was ringing still in the wooden steeple, and one old man was skittishly trotting in the middle of the road to church—yes, I would go, and they might think ill of me who chose! There was a light in the window of the Stewarts' house—so much the better if the brothers stopped away, I next thought. I should have done my best to make some little return in the way that had been wished. Then I went on once more, and tried very hard to compose myself for good.

Into the old church, looking very grey and misty that dull evening, despite an extra pair of candles on the clerk's desk, and two more in the organ loft. Looking also very cold and empty—half a

dozen heads in the free seats, a dozen and a half in the rest of the church, certainly no greater number. Looking also very calm and still, bringing peace to me suddenly, and reminding me that it was God's house into which I had brought a beating heart and whirling brain, and thoughts so out of place there.

Leaving my wet cloak and umbrella on the little seat immediately within the doors, I walked at once to the Kingsworth pew and entered. Then away went my devoutness again, for coolly seated in Mrs. Kingsworth's place was Mr. Stewart—*the* Mr. Mark Stewart who had asked, as a favour that I would come to church that evening.

Did he look his gratitude?—I thought he did in that one fleeting instant that our eyes met, and before I turned away from him. I was disconcerted; I was very troubled, and I sank on my knees in a corner of that stately pew and asked forgiveness for the motive which had lured me thither. I was sedate and self-possessed from that time, and I think that he understood my thoughts and respected them.

He sat some distance from me, and I looked away from him, too studiously perhaps, for I looked away with all my heart! I felt that once or twice he turned his grave handsome face towards me, and seemed to study me intently, as I fought hard to follow Mr. Crease's prayers, and succeeded, and submerged myself from *him*. He startled me a little by finding the first hymn for me in my book, and passing it quietly across to me; but he stood apart from me when the hymn began, and I was thankful for it.

Mr. Crease looked down at us from his pulpit during the sermon, in which I was not so successful in keeping my old embarrassment away. It was not one of Mr. Crease's best sermons, or his scanty congregation rendered him less eloquent. The rain made a great noise against the glass too—as it had done in Mrs. Kingsworth's drawing-room—the wind came sighing through the doors into the church, and went moaning down the aisles; the candles sputtered in the damp air, the clerk fell asleep and knocked one over with his elbow, and in the impulse of the moment caused Mr. Crease to look over suddenly at his subordinate; the night

came on apace, and it was dark when the curate said his last amen.

I was sorry when it was all over; my heart began to plunge so fitfully with the thoughts of the next few moments—which might be commonplace moments enough for both of us, a something at which I should laugh heartily to-morrow, but which were surcharged with perplexity at that time.

"Shall we go now, Miss Casey?" he whispered, so suddenly that I jumped in my seat; "I think that we are the last in the church."

"I am ready," I whispered back.

We went down the aisles to the entrance door—leaning forward towards my cloak, he intercepted me, took it from the seat, spread it forth, and placed it on my shoulders.

"This is yours," he said, taking up the last umbrella left there, and opening it; "now let us brave these angry elements!"

He offered me his arm, and I laid my hand upon it timidly, yet trustfully. Did I understand him suddenly, or lose all doubts then, as we went out together in the rain?

"I have to thank you for coming, Miss Casey,"

he said, when we were proceeding together down the road.

The wind had abated, and the rain was more steadily descending. It was a warm and sultry night for the beginning of June, I thought.

"You wished me to come—you have been kind to John," I answered.

"Kind!—no, only politic."

He was silent after that; he left me to deliberate upon that incomprehensible answer, or he was at a loss for words. At a loss for once in his life, I believe, and even a trifle put out at the sudden cessation of his powers of speech, for he began again with a wrench.

"Miss Casey," he said, sharply and spasmodically, "has it struck you that I am a strange man? Indirectly, it has more than once come to my ears that public opinion has decided that I am a little eccentric. Do you think so?"

"N—no," I answered.

"I have a habit of arriving at conclusions very rapidly, of seeing what is best for me more quickly than most people, and of deciding at once, no matter the venture, so that in my own opinion I am right.

Cautious people do not understand this—now, you are a cautious woman."

"Am I?"

"I fancy so—from all that I have heard, I should imagine so. You see that I have been making many inquiries concerning you—will you forgive me?"

"There is nothing to forgive, Mr. Stewart."

"Patience, we shall judge better of that presently. Let me tell you that I have arrived at another conclusion—that my best chance of happiness in life, my only chance, is with *you!* On a very short acquaintance I have been bold enough to tell you this—for on a very short acquaintance I have been able to perceive how amiable and good you are. This is not the conventional style of courtship, I believe, but it strikes me that I have simply to tell you the truth, and not let my chances float away from me, because some laws of courtship, which I do not comprehend, stand between me and my honest utterance. Miss Casey," he said, laying his hand upon my own—it was tremulous as mine, too—"is there anything to forgive now?"

"Oh! sir," I could only gasp, "what made you think of me?"

"I might ask what made you cross my path, Miss Casey?" he said more lightly, "when I had made up my mind to eschew wedlock—when I had failed to discover a genuine woman, and had met with nothing but vanity, selfishness and deceit. There, I am hard upon your sex—I am a hard man—I make atonement. I have seen, for the first time in my life, the woman I could love and honour; will she have me—will she try to love me in good time?"

I knew that I loved him then, that I had loved him from the moment that he had seemed drawn to me, although I did my best to press the truth down—deep down in my heart, where all my little secrets were hidden. I knew that I had loved him long before—it seemed years to me—by the efforts which I had made not to think of him, and failing that, to think of him as a rich and proud man, whose sphere was not mine, and whose progress therein had nothing to do with a dependent like myself. If he had passed away without a sign, and we had not met again, I might have

persuaded myself in time that I had never thought of him, that he had struck me as a handsome, clever man, nothing more. But *now !*—when he had owned that he could love me, that he did love me, what could I do but whisper a return, and show that his confession had made me very, very happy !

It was settled then between us—we were engaged to each other; Mr. Stewart had made known his intentions—far away for ever seemed all uncertainty of life, and I was a woman who had missed the proverbial ill-luck attendant on the Casey family. Yes, I was very happy after my first confusion had been somewhat recovered from; when I was sure that all had not been dream-land, and this was a reality which a fleeting hour would not dissipate.

We went on together towards the house, he speaking and I listening to that story of when he liked me first, and why he liked me—that old, old story, which takes its vivid colouring from the heart, and is the last to fade, no matter how the story ends !

"For a time, Bertie," he said—he pounced quickly upon the familiar home-name that had

been dear to me through life, "we must be content to see little of each other, until the time comes when I can claim you. Why it has not come yet—I will tell you presently—for a while even, a few business secrets from *you!*"

"I can trust you."

"For a while too, and for your own sake, this engagement between us a secret from those whose business it is *not.* Seeing clearly enough that I am not liked at the Hall, and that your position there would be a painful one, I ask you to be silent. It is my wish, but it is not in opposition to your own, if you prefer that they should be acquainted with all that we have signed and sealed."

"And your brother?"

"I have no secrets from him. Dear old Dick, the best and heartiest of brothers, knows all. Like a good fellow as he always is, he stayed at home to give me a fair chance!"

"And he thinks—he thinks that you——"

"Have shown myself a wise man in my choice."

"And I so poor!"

"Don't pity yourself for that. Think of the

horror of marrying a wife who would always be taunting me with the money she had brought into the family. What a handle for invective when we quarrelled."

"Shall you quarrel much?"

"Oh! I am a dreadful fellow to lose my temper!"

"I don't believe that."

"*Nous verrons*, Bertie—when I go courting, I turn my silver lining to the light."

"And my brother John?"

"Is not to be trusted just yet with the story. It will embarrass our relations together, and perhaps balk the one chance that I have thrown in his way. You see the reason now?"

"Because——"

He would not let me finish.

"Because I am a proud man," he said laughing, "and wish my family connections to be presentable."

"You are very kind!"

"No, politic, as I said before. I must polish up John Kingsworth—make a man of brother John in Edinburgh."

"And if he fail to realize your hopes concerning him?"

"I never like to think of failure, Bertie," he said boldly; "I work upwards, keeping down all thoughts of those who are sinking down to ruin—poor unfortunates—keeping down also the chances that may be against success, and which to enumerate is to feel afraid. You see that I am rather reckless in my ideas; that I am not the peerless and priceless man who makes the hero—merely a man of business, with an unbusiness way of going to work at times. And here in the midst of my first courtship, plunging into the romance which I have met at Wilthorpe, come the trade thoughts in an odd fashion. Why, Bertie, this is not love-making *à la mode*?"

Was it real love-making after that, or had it been real and fervent for all our prosaic talk? At all events, a something that made my heart throb with its deep sense of happiness, and is not—and never has been—put into words.

Life opened out anew, and I was changed. The girl who was growing old-fashioned before her time went forwards to the old fashion that is

always new, and altered very rapidly—whether for better, or worse, the future pages of this book must indicate.

Sufficient for this time the happiness thereof, when I walked in the summer rain with Mark Stewart of Edinburgh. Sufficient for all time left to me the remembrance of that night.

For ever standing alone amidst a crowd of retrospects, that picture. But yesterday the slanting rain, the shadowy avenue, the rustling trees, the dark clouds lowering above them, the tall figure of my love bending low and whispering in my ear, as we wound our way slowly towards Mrs. Kingsworth's home.

Even now I step back to that night, feeling no regret, uttering no complaint. The truth and purity of that time steal back still to me, and I judge not hastily of him or me. The shadow of the after-troubles no longer rests upon me. Yes, but yesterday!

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

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